



Angels
of
Wrath
SERIES

One

Paulina Ian-Kane

One

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Paulina Ian-Kane Books

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Foreword

This is a gory, dark humor romance.

One of the main characters is a psychopath and the other is a forensic pathologist.

There's death—unfortunately there's no sight of the hot Grim Reaper—a hint of a body autopsy, violence and torture, very spicy scenes, laughter and most side characters enjoy blood.

If you don't like a possessive, over the top, selfish, dark and dirty protagonist who enjoys punishing villains— the bad kind not the sexy kind — please don't read this story.

Heavy issues are also present. Talk of self-harming, killing and experimentation on children.

Be warned! But also please enjoy!

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Also By Paulina Ian-Kane

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‘We are all books. Most people only see our cover, the minority read only the introduction, many people believe the critics. Few will know our content.’

Emile Zola

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Prologue

Twenty years ago.

Project: Blood Assassin

Subject: One

Day 732

Time 19:30

Subject One's progress is still too slow to make an impact. In contrast to the other subjects, there are only a few sporadic instances of positive feedback. However, most of the time, One seems scared or uninterested, becoming unresponsive to any tests or reinforcements. In addition to experiencing night terrors, One is also suffering from a lack of appetite and sudden tremors caused by fear or anxiety. Punishments only worsen his erratic behavior.

The presence of Subject Two in the last six months hasn't yielded the predicted results. Having the two subjects share a cell has negatively

affected both of them. Subject Two didn't influence One; it was the other way around. Two seems to have developed a liking for One.

Nevertheless, all hope is not lost. We can now conduct new experiments on Subject Two, focusing on the absence of Subject One and its repercussions. Subject One of Project Blood Assassin has failed. The elimination process will begin tomorrow.

Reminder: Keep the other subjects away from each other.

Doctor Megan Katherine Bear looked up from the notes in front of her and shifted her attention to the woman across the room.

“What’s with the disgusted face, Megs?” The woman, Linda, paused near the tray full of liquors lying on the sideboard in Megan’s office. Her long, pale fingers grasped one of the ornate decanters as she poured a generous amount of amber liquid into two crystal glasses. The thin heels of her Louboutin pumps clicked rhythmically on the wooden floor as she took a seat in one of the round, Italian-leather armchairs facing the mahogany desk.

“The cold, unfeeling manner in which these notes are written is appalling. How can they treat people as if they are mere objects? Even worse, they’re children. It’s horrifying!” Megan exclaimed.

Linda nodded, placing the glass in front of Megan before taking a long sip from her own. “I just got off the phone with Colonel Brody. Both he and Miss Elody from Social Services are on board with our plan. They’ll keep a close eye on us—whatever the hell that means—but I *convinced* them to let us proceed.”

“They agreed?” Megan asked incredulously. She had already devised a plan B to smuggle the children out of the country to a safe place. It would be a

challenging task, requiring her to call in multiple favors, but she was prepared to do whatever it took to help them. Finally, her family's dirty money could pay for something truly beneficial.

Linda snorted. "What we uncovered, it's a damn nightmare, Megs. If the press gets a whiff of it, prominent heads will fall, and imagine the repercussions with the public. Of course they're happy to wash their hands of it and find a fast, silent solution."

"So the general agreed to all our terms?" Megan asked her partner, reaching for her glass with a trembling hand. Although the news made things easier, it was not lost on her what a strenuous duty lay before them.

The wicked, slow smile Linda gave was such a contrast with her angelic features. Big, blue eyes brightened with what seemed like innocence on a cute, round face covered in freckles. Linda's deceiving appearance helped her greatly in her line of work. "General Brody thinks he has the upper hand. But a couple of pictures of him butt naked licking his Daddy's boots will turn him into the submissive doggy he really is." Her straight, baby-blond locks waved around her lean shoulders with her shrug.

"Less TMI next time." Megan shuddered. Not at the daddy kink—if it was consensual, good for him—but at the next meeting with General Brody. The mental image of his sweat-soaked, hairy, body bent over on the floor... Some things should remain private for a reason.

Even so, Linda's chuckle made Megan smile for the first time in, what? Two days? The thought took her back to their assignment. A lot had to be done, but there were different aspects to take into consideration. The children's well-being had to be front and center. And figuring out how to do that wasn't going to be an easy task. Not after what those children had endured.

What transpired from those notes was shocking. Hideous. Sickening.

“Are you sure it’s not too late for those kids?”

Megan took a big breath. She was one of the most renowned psychiatrists in the country, but that was not why Linda trusted her opinion. “Those notes are terribly detailed. We know exactly what has been *done* to the children and how they reacted to it. But the mind is an intricate maze full of dark corners and sudden turns. Perhaps if we show them a straighter path to follow, they could turn out to be self-caring, balanced individuals.”

“Those Frankenstein doctors played with their heads, Megan. They fucked them up. Helping them...it won’t be all black and white. Are you ready to bend your morals a tad?” Linda raised a questioning eyebrow at her.

“I’m a psychiatrist, Linda. Moral principles can be debatable at times. The kids are still young. And open to suggestions. Their prefrontal cortex is still developing. Their sense of right versus wrong comes from the environment around them and their cognitive, emotional, and social skills.”

“Exactly. All they know is metal bars and what those doctors forced on them,” Linda retorted.

“Until now,” Megan quipped. “Those children are not hopeless. I—we—have to try. But I can’t do it by myself. I need your skills as well. I need you with me, Lin.” Megan leaned over the desk, her short, wavy, black bob rippling with the movement. She grabbed Linda’s hand and laced their fingers together.

Linda stared at their hands for a long while. Then she took another sip from her glass and relaxed against the soft leather. “Where do we start?”

The tension left Megan’s shoulders, and a strong sense of determination settled in her gut.

“Subject One.”

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Chapter 1

Present day

RAPHAEL

“Come back to bed,” a feminine voice whispers sensually.

Back? I haven’t even touched that bed. And I have no intention of doing it now after the deed is finally done. The beautiful girl is sitting naked with her back to the headboard. Her black hair falls in waves on her smooth chest, covering her perky breasts. Her shaved cunt is still glistening with her juices. Next to her, the sheets rustle over the shape of another body. A hairy, muscular leg is tangled in the champagne fabric, the meaty butt jiggling slightly with the movement.

My gaze remains vacant while my head is already out of this room. I need my body to quickly catch on. I turn away and grab my black leather jacket from the chair. Without wasting another glance on them, I walk out of the five-star hotel room and check my phone on the way to the elevator. There’s a text from Rami. Looks like I’m going home tonight.

The woman at the reception desk stands straighter when she sees me, sending me an inviting smile. I tilt my head at her, but don't stop on my way out. The room has been paid for, and I have what I came for tonight. Not interested in more.

The sky is dark against the streetlights of downtown Chicago. The spring air is cool on my face, and my satisfied body relishes the fresh breeze. When the valet finally brings my black Ducati around, I give him a large tip. I slide my dark helmet on and mount the bike, revving the engine. For a couple of seconds, I let myself feel the low rumble vibrating through my body. Beneath me, the wild power is waiting to be unleashed. Fucking perfect. Kicking back the stand, I release the brake and whiz down Michigan Avenue.

I'm one with my bike, leaning left and right, weaving around cars, listening to the wind hissing. The engine thunders beautifully. My body is relaxed after the hookup. Sexual frustration isn't advisable in my case because, when I turn restless, something's gotta give. I become impulsive and sloppy in other areas of my life, which is risky. But tonight, I was barely able to come. Thought a threesome with the two models I picked up at a club would help, but I lost interest after the first five minutes together.

Maybe I should try orgies again. I used to enjoy the uninhibited atmosphere and slightly sadistic tone of Madam Claudette's club. But that was years ago. If it gets out now that millionaire Raphael Bear-Stone likes to dip his dick in that kind of large buffet, my mothers will cut that particular appendage off and put it in a jar for my brother Sari to examine.

I stop at a traffic light and turn my palm up to look at the long scar across it. It's a reminder of the promise I made to myself and the others. I can't jeopardize everything we've built. And although I have no remorse or any

kind of empathetic quality—the joys of being a psychopath—I’m not an idiot either. An asshole, definitely. But I like my comfortable life; won’t do anything to risk it.

Still, I need more excitement, other than the usual kind I get with my brothers. I’m fucking bored. And boredom is another feeling not beneficial to a psychopath. My mind starts wandering, and who knows where it’ll take me.

So, orgies are out. Paying for sex, then. I can ask Rague, since he’s been using that kind of service for a while now. At least I can enjoy some of my kinks without having to pretend to care about the other person’s needs.

I turn on the Bluetooth inside my helmet and let the music of AC/DC fill my head with mayhem and blood. Thirty minutes later, I’m slowing down on the long driveway lined with white Bradford Pear trees. They look gloomy and ominous waving with the wind in the darkness.

When I was a kid, I thought they kept going to infinity. But the grey road does end, in front of high, heavy, black gates. The two stone bears perched on the top of the marble columns on either side welcome me home once again. I live in a penthouse in Streeterville in downtown Chicago, but this is the place where I grew up with the others. And now we use it as our base for our side projects. The bloody-fun kind.

I pull up near the gates, facing the slate wall where a small screen is placed. I take off my helmet and push some of the locks plastered on my forehead away. Then, leaning closer to the screen, I let the eye scanner do its job.

“Welcome, Raphael,” a woman’s languid voice says.

“Serena,” I reply, letting the AI check my voice as well.

“Please, enter.”

The gates slide open and, slotting the helmet through my arm, I drive the rest of the way to the garage, only glancing at the building's austere facade of white bricks. Inside, there's Rague's old pickup truck, and Gabe's new slick GT. Uri's Hummer is parked further down on the left. But Rami's electrical sardine can on wheels is missing.

I place my bike right in front of the electrical plug, as a payback. Teasing his brothers is Rami's favorite pastime. And even though I usually shrug it off, this boredom is turning to irritation. I want everyone around me to feel it as well. Being the only psychopath around here has its pros.

The garage door starts closing while I reach the brown tool wall. Serena's voice tells me to place my hand on the black screen in front of me, well concealed among the many pieces of hardware. A green laser light moves over my palm and then the panel eases backward and slides along the wall, revealing descending metallic stairs. They are illuminated by white hospital lights that are damn annoying to my sensitive eyes.

That's Uri's fucking doing. "Serena, remind Ferdinand to change the lights all over the base. I left the bulbs on the kitchen table."

The AI answers immediately. "Added to his tomorrow to-do list."

Being the only ones in the family with personality disorders—Uri is a sociopath—we tend to like to *play* with each other. It's like a Pink Panther game, where there's no inspector and we are both thieves stealing from each other. Changing the yellow warm lights with white ones was a damn low blow. Taping the yellow ones under Suicide Bridge while forcing me to retrieve them? It was the lowest. I could have easily bought new ones, but what's the fun in that?

The ball is in my court now. What to steal to make Uri miserable?

Sari's melancholic country music floats from the lab. Instead of heading that way, I stop in front of the FUNS room. I can see Rague's huge shoulders looming over a crying figure sitting with their hands and feet tied to a chair. We have a *donor* in the base.

I push the button on the intercom near the door, but Rague's gruff voice is too low to understand. Still, the menace leaking out of his tone and the huge as fuck knife in his hand tells me all I need to know.

Behind me, I hear the squeak of sneakers descending the stairs. "Ten bucks says he'll start with the ear." Rami stops next to me, punching me hard in the shoulder. Guess he found my bike in the garage.

"Right or left?" Gabe asks in his monotone voice, coming on my other side. He's tapping speedily on his phone.

"Does it matter?" I interject.

"Huh. I guess not," he replies without looking up. "Ten on the pinky." He slides his phone into his side pocket and pulls on the lapels of his dark-grey tailored suit. The color matches his steel eyes perfectly.

"If Rague goes for the fingers, he'll cut the thumb," I observe.

"Maximum damage." Gabe hums.

I nod. "Ten on the eye. He'll go for disfiguration."

"Good one," Rami says, taking a drink from his plastic to go cup with the '*Might be water, might be Tequila*' label. The gloves on his hands are black today, and his reddish beard is getting so long I can barely see his lips.

"Was the green plastic with tiny white dots really necessary?" Gabe raises an eyebrow at Rami. I look at the bright material covering the floor and walls of the FUNS room. This last time was Rami's turn to restock the supplies, and he likes to be...creative. Huge bonus in his book if he can piss some of us off.

“What? I read online that this shade of green promotes calmness and encourages mental health and concentration. Good for Hulky over there.” He points at where Rague is panting furiously. “Plus, it freaks out the donors.” Like the one currently in the chair who is nervously glancing around.

“Black soothes me,” I say.

“Okay. So, next time I’ll go for something more...Addams Family-sh.” He smirks at me.

Rague’s angry rumble booms through the intercom, and then he goes and chops off the whole hand. None of us flinch at the gory sight. Or the high pitch of the donor’s scream. My eyes are zeroed on the blood dripping from the stump. Dark red, thick, and silky. What a beauty.

Rami whistles. The guy in the chair pathetically whimpers, and I tune out the ensuing screams and begging. Because it’s annoying.

“Unpredictable bastard,” I grumble. Among the six of us, Rague is the mercurial one. At times even a loose cannon. Not for the first time, I wonder how I’m the only psychopath in the group.

“Money, please.” Gabe waits with his palm up, his Rolex peeking out from the cuff of his suit.

“The fuck?” I mutter.

“You said finger, bro,” Rami reminds him.

“I was the closest.” Gabe gives both of us a “duh” look.

Rami pulls out his wallet and slaps a green banknote in Gabe’s open hand. I, on the other hand, give him the finger.

“Who’s the donor anyway?” Gabe asks, not sounding curious at all. His usual flat voice is the reason Rami calls him C-3PO.

“Charles Berson,” Rami replies, baring his teeth. “Indolent social worker by day, child abuser by night.”

Now I know why Rague got especially gruesome with *this* donor. He’s ruthless with all his donors—or should I call them predators?—disguised as exemplary citizens. But he’s fucking brutal to anyone who hurts children.

I don’t have an overwhelming compulsion to kill. I don’t fantasize about mutilated corpses and sharing a *charcuterie board* with Hannibal the Cannibal. But when my bloodthirsty need hits, I like to use different methods to satisfy it, while still following the family code. When someone’s own darkness taints others, they need to be expunged. Eradicated from earth. The fact that I feed my own bottomless, bloody need while doing it certainly makes it more enjoyable. And easier, thanks to my lack of remorse and empathy. I find people with a full range of emotions...limited.

“Shut up!” Rague growls, making the donor shiver. “Arrogant prick only when beating kids.”

I can hear him clearly now, since he turned to the narrow, steel table facing us. He nods at us without looking up, too focused on his task. Gotta respect that.

“Please, you got the wrong pe-person,” the donor pleads again.

“Did you stop when little Annabel Davis begged you? Or Peter Harris? Or Jake and Mary Lewis?” Rague snarls. “Did you even know their names when you used that steel pipe on them? Or were they just sandbags to you?”

Rague’s hand slowly waves, fingers flying on the various tools lining the tray. He stops, hovering over an axe. I feel the smirk on my face. That’s my favorite. Blood splashing and gushing. Messy, but satisfying. Fuck, the half-chub inside my pants is not a surprise. And I don’t do anything to hide it. Don’t need to in front of my brothers.

Each one of us has what the society we live in would call “*odd tastes*.” But being experimented on for years while we were still kids by shithead scientists left some consequences. That’s why we started this family side business together: to focus our preferences and skills into something... productive.

Rague’s fingers finally curl around a toothed handsaw. Not my first choice. Not my last, either.

“Rague, Sari needs the donor’s samples,” Gabe tells him through the intercom. We call them donors because before meeting their well-deserved death, they so generously gift us with DNA. Tissue samples, blood, or whatever my brother Sari needs for his research. He’s a medical and research scientist, specializing in various branches of medicine. What people refer to as a genius.

“Already took them. The snotty prick is all mine. And speaking of tiny dicks...” Rague looks down at the naked donor’s body. But the guy seems out, his head lolling on the back of the chair, eyes half-closed as beads of sweat roll down his face. Blood dripping from his sliced wrist makes a pool on the floor.

Predators like him are all the same. Feeling powerful and untouchable while crushing weaker people, and then turning into spineless crybabies in front of a bigger fish. Rague goes to get the water bucket to wake the donor up, and I’m out. Even the sight of a tormented dickhead doesn’t do it for me tonight.

“Don’t take too long, Hulky. We need to talk,” Rami tells Rague before walking to the lab.

“Party-poopers.” I hear Rague’s gruff reply while on my way to the lab as well.

Rami inserts the code into the panel, and the heavy glass door opens. Sari is at his desk, working on one of his blood experiments. Uri is sitting on the rolling chair near him, twirling a small, sharp-looking blade between his fingers. His dreads are tied on the back of his head, showing his strong jaw and many piercings. His hazel eyes on Sari.

Sari is the classic unsocial genius. Amazing at his job, but terrible at socializing. That's why he doesn't go anywhere unless it's strictly related to his job. He's also the most oblivious person I've ever met. But he uses his elevated IQ to help discover and improve healing solutions through the medical research and development company we established: Bear-Stone Labs. Hence us standing in the lab.

"It will be ten minutes more in the FUNS room," I let them know.

"That name is still lame," Gabe states.

"You're lame," Rami retorts.

"What does FUNS stand for again?" Uri asks him.

"Fucked Up Nasty Shitheads."

Uri chuckles. "Right. I dig it."

"I should make a gold plate for the door," Rami ponders out loud.

"It already has a name. Donor Room," Gabe interjects.

"*That* is lame," Rami quips.

"Did Rague go for the nose?" Uri interrupts them again.

"No," Gabe replies, sitting on the sofa on the other side of the room.

The lab is spacious, divided into two big areas. One side has all the machinery and toys Sari needs for his research—plus Rami's digital corner—and a smaller storage room with more of Sari's stuff. And the other side is where the rest of us chill with two L-shaped leather couches and a big flat screen hanging on the wall. The open concept, state-of-the-art kitchen is in

the back of the room with a dining table big enough to fit all of us. The privacy window on the right gives us a view of the large property, but prevents unfamiliar, inquisitive eyes from peeking inside.

“He went for the hand,” Sari states, looking through the microscope. A long lock of black hair escapes his low ponytail.

“How do you know?” Rami asks him, sitting at his desk. “You were here.” He starts moving his hands in the air, making a bunch of holograms appear.

“He’s wearing a red tank top. And the donor hurt children.” Sari says it like the reason is obvious.

I search through my episodic memories and, of course, Sari is right. Red tank top plus children in pain equals...hands gone. Both of them, before he focuses further south, usually. My brother may be a bit naive, but he’s great at finding connections.

Rami hums to himself, and Uri gives Sari an affectionate half-smile.

“Why are you bunching your eyebrows, Sari?” I say nonchalantly, grabbing a crystal globe with some kind of inscription from his desk and tossing it up in the air. Uri’s eyes are on the globe, while Sari lifts his head to look at me with confusion.

“I’m not bunching my eyebrows.” He touches between them. “Am I?” He turns to Uri.

But Rami answers without taking his eyes off whatever he’s doing, I can always count on him screwing with...well, everybody. “A bit.”

“What’s wrong?” Uri asks him, tucking away his knife.

“You’re squinting your eyes. Another migraine?” I casually slip the suggestion. Sari has strong ones from time to time. And that just works perfectly with my fucking around.

“Hmm, I...” He really frowns now, more with confusion, nervously tucking the escaped hair behind his ear.

“Where are your headache pills? You should take one, just in case,” Uri says worriedly, jumping up and going to the kitchen. He comes back quickly with a glass of water.

It’s too easy to fuck with him when Sari is involved.

“Laying down is also good for migraines,” Rague pitches in as he walks into the lab. His short hair is damp, and he’s wearing a flannel shirt. Ending donors is usually messy, and we need to be careful not to leave any evidence on ourselves. Hence the huge shower next to the FUNS room.

“Another thing that helps with migraines? Yellow...lights.” I smirk at Uri. His eyes widen when he gets it. “Fuck off, foster brother,” he grumbles at me, flipping me off.

“Suicide. Bridge,” I snap and flip him back.

Sari shakes his head, but his lips twitch in amusement. He’s always found our manipulative games...entertaining.

I put the globe back and let my body fall into a chair, rolling toward Rami.

“You two are incorrigible. But I’m a fan of your work.” He smiles my way.

I feel a slight enjoyment hearing Uri’s annoyed grunt. “He’s a psychopathic asshole!”

So very true.

“Says the narcissistic sociopath,” I throw back at him. Uri is the successful owner of various restaurants all around Illinois, and actually enjoys being surrounded by people who adore him.

“Why are we here? I’m busy,” Gabe interjects, blonde head down, eyes on his phone once again. He’s our legal advisor. Hence hand-glued-to-phone.

But with our family side business, having a dirty shirt among us is a precautionary step.

Rague sits his huge hulking ass next to him on the sofa, making Gabe bounce a little.

“I think there’s something going on with Meg,” Rami says in a solemn tone, which is very out-of-character. And all the eyes in the room are instantly on him.

“What is it?” Gabe abandons his phone on the rectangular coffee table.

“She’s acting...strangely,” Rami continues, his fingers flying over the white keyboard. “Serena, screen please.” A map of the Lincoln area suddenly appears on the white wall near him. Rague and Gabe both leave the sofa and walk closer. “In the last three months she went to the Grand View General Hospital four times.”

“Are you cyber stalking her?” Sari sounds surprised.

“I asked her where she was going, and she has a tell when she lies.”

“Slight puckering of her lips,” Gabe offers. Uri and I both nod.

“So, I checked,” Rami finishes. He’s the family hacker. He mainly helps us find information on the donors and covers our butts when we fuck up. He’s a big motherfucker, but not as big as Rague.

“Do you know anything, foster brother?” Rague looks at me.

They always try to tease me with this shit. Although Meg and Linda did legally adopt me and Sari when we were kids—they only fostered the others—I’m not that much chummier with her than any of the other people in this room. She sometimes functions as an advisor for Bear-Stone Labs—the medical company I’m president of—but we sure as fuck don’t dwell in chit-chats. I never do. With anybody.

“No. Maybe it was a psychiatrist consultation? Do you know which doctor she talked to?”

Rami nods. “Three months ago, she had an appointment to see the immune system specialist in the hospital, Dr. Sallinger. Maybe her lupus is getting worse.”

Everybody grunts at that. Meg has been fighting lupus for many years. But she’s a very proud person; doesn’t like to look weak in front of others, not even her family. Which doesn’t make it easy for us. And that’s why we usually keep a close eye on her. But lately I’ve been too focused on myself, trying to push away the unsettling, restless feeling that’s slowly crawling inside my guts. Even unleashing it on donors doesn’t make it go away.

“Did you ask her?” Sari looks at Rami. As usual, he goes for the clear, bold front attack.

“Did you talk to Linda?” Gabe instead goes for the sneaky side, lawyer-style.

“If Linda doesn’t know about this, she’s going to flip,” Rague reminds us.

We all flinch back at that, surely thinking about her devious, wicked, Machiavellian ways. My inner, unscrupulous nature salutes her.

The mere idea that I have been unaware of something going on with Meg already makes me fixate on what it could be. Meg and Linda found me. Saved me, and then took care of me. Of all six of us. We owe them everything. Making sure they’re okay is a task we all willingly accepted.

“What else?” Uri asks Rami. “Going to a hospital a few times could suggest she’s having a hard time with her lupus, but it’s not a major red flag. She looks fine. So what made you call all of us here?”

“I hid a tracker in her phone.”

We didn't blink at that. The six of us all have trackers placed under the skin behind our left ear. After a very messy encounter with one of the donors four years ago—followed by Rague's disappearance for an entire week—we unanimously decided to get trackers. But we also promised to use them only in case of emergency.

Rami pointed at a spot on the map.

"Marnie's," Uri reads aloud. "A restaurant?"

"A diner. She's been going there every Friday evening."

"Let me guess, for the last three months?"

Gabe is right, judging by Rami's firm nod.

"Do you have any idea why?" I ask.

"She uses her credit card every other time and pays for two."

Interesting.

"She meets with someone," Uri says.

The Sallinger doctor?

"And they eat pies," Rami finishes. A memory of us as kids sharing cakes at the kitchen table with Meg suddenly pops into my head.

"Pies?" Gabe tilts his head to the left with what I think is curiosity.

Sari pops back into the conversation. "Meg loves sweets. We all do because of her."

"Can't you hack into the diner's security cameras?" I ask him.

"No cameras. Only one, from the ATM on the next block, and it's too far and old to get a good image," Rami replies.

"How about hacking the mic on her phone to listen to the conversation?"

Uri suggests, sounding excited. He does love mysteries.

"She always turns her phone off when she gets inside the diner." Rami huffs.

All I see are grim and confused expressions around me.

“This can’t be cheating,” Rami says.

Ah, but it could.

Rague rumbles. “Meg is crazy about Linda. Always has been.”

That’s also true.

“Also, Linda would probably summon the wrath of the gods,” Uri notes.

“To torture Meg’s lover slowly and thoroughly,” Rague adds with a faraway expression, and a small, dreamy smile on his lips.

“Something happened three months ago. I’m pretty sure it’s linked to that. And that *something* is making her meet this person and...eat pies. It’s ridiculous.” Rami looks pensive, moving his gloved hand over his reddish beard.

“It surely is,” Gabe agrees.

I don’t get why.

“How is it even possible that Linda doesn’t know about it?” Uri interjects. Linda is an ex-CIA agent. Something sliding by her is near impossible. I know because she taught everyone in this room every single James-Bond-like tactic and method there is.

“She’s been busy with a job. Her times away have been more frequent,” Gabe explains, leaning his hip on Rami’s desk.

‘*CIA agents never really retire,*’ she’s said on more than one occasion.

“Tomorrow is Friday. I can follow Meg and find out what this is all about,” I say.

“Or we could ask her?” Sari tries again. I sometimes wonder if his straight approach is bold or just naive.

I look at my brothers. I know they all care, even Uri. Me? Contrary to popular belief, people suffering from psychopathy can experience emotions.

But we do have a blunted emotional response if our attention is directed toward something else. In essence, I feel emotions, but have a reduced ability to process them. I can identify them, thanks to Meg's teaching. And also ignore them, if I feel they might interfere with attaining personal goals. One of which is finding out what's going on with Meg.

"She'll just Pinocchio her way through it again. Stalking sounds more reasonable," Rami says, eliciting a few snorts. "All in favor?"

I raise my hand. Sari is the only one with his arms down. But it's five against him.

"I'll come with you," Rague tells me.

"Uri and I have a serial rapist to castrate tomorrow night," Rami lets me know. "But I can take a break if you need me." He mimes a phone with his fingers. "I'll connect Serena to the baseline. You can use her as well."

I nod, feeling a small excitement building inside me. For the first time in a long time, it's not linked to blood.

"Whose turn is it to help me get rid of the donor's body?" Rague asks.

We all point to Uri.

"Fuck."



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Chapter 2

MICHAEL

Lincoln Park evening air. It has a unique scent to it. Earth, water and must, with a hint of baked bread and sweet tomato sauce coming from the pizza place on the corner. Underneath it all, car exhaust fumes. It smells like comfort for some weird reason. Being out always does.

My mind goes back to the morgue and the two refrigerated corpses I locked into the cold chambers. One young guy, early twenties, whose life has been taken violently, and one elderly man who died while sleeping placidly in a hospital bed. Death comes the same for everybody, but the way we go can be so very different.

I think again about the young guy. I don't usually consult for the police, but the Chicago P.D.'s forensic hematologist got food poisoning a couple of months ago. As the Grand View Hospital coroner, I was asked to temporarily take his place for the afternoon. Fortunately, only one body arrived on my table. Unfortunately, the young boy was the first victim of a

serial murder case. For continuity purposes, they asked me to perform the autopsies on the next victims; that, and the fact that they're overworked. Chicago is a violent city.

Paul Philman, the last man brutally assaulted, is the fourth body they've found. He was older, in his late twenties. But just like the other victims, he had blue eyes, light brown hair, and a lean body. He was also strangled with a metal cord.

The detectives have a coldblooded murderer on their hands. And I have to focus on Mr. Coleman, the elderly man who quietly died in the hospital. I need to return his personal belongings to the family.

I push my hands into my brown Harrington jacket and check both ways before crossing the street. I take a big breath as I enter Marnie's to fully enjoy the aroma of bitter, black coffee and cavity-sweet cakes. Nearing one of the old stools at the counter, I smile at Berta.

"Doc is finally here. You're late tonight." She waggles her eyebrows suggestively at me. The dirty gossip-bee. For the mug of smoky caffeine she's pouring in front of me, I'll tell her anything she wants to know. It doesn't mean it'll be interesting.

"I wish. Had a pile of paperwork to fill." I show her with my hand how high it was.

"Must be hard to write while shooing all the admirers away." She winks. I have to admit that my blonde hair, light eyes, and fit body do attract men's attention. But my *macabre* job and distrustful inclinations—which, apparently, make me come across as lofty—turn that interest away quickly.

"I'm a multitasker." My dry humor ignites a low chuckle from the nearest booth. I turn to face Meg. Her black and grey strands are held back in a tight bun at her nape as usual. Her dark eyes sparkle with mirth and

sharpness. She's a forensic psychiatric—or crime shrink—I bumped into at Grand View one morning. We started talking over the uneatable banana pie at the hospital cafeteria and discovered a common addiction to cakes and old crime TV series. That's how we kind of fell into our evening meetings at Marnie's.

I moved to Chicago only a few months ago. Don't have any friends apart from my medical colleagues, and I feel quite comfortable talking with her.

"What's our poison tonight?" she asks me, pointing at the cakes in the window display. We always take two different desserts and share them. And tonight, it's my turn to choose. I walk to the cracked booth, place my coffee on the table's resin surface and slide in front of her. The vinyl against my khaki pants makes a rumbling, fart-like sound, but we both ignore it.

I grab the pie menu and then suggest, "How about blueberry cheesecake and sour cherry cake?"

She wrinkles her nose.

"Okay. My bad." I pucker my lips in thought. "Blueberry cheesecake and peach cobbler with vanilla ice cream."

"Now you're talking." Her smile is small but devious.

"Did you hear that, Berta?" This time of night, the diner is always almost deserted, so I just raise my voice.

"Yep, voices carry. So talk louder if you're gossiping. Love some real-life Grey's Anatomy," the busty redheaded waitress replies, making both of us smile with her cheekiness.

"How was your day?" Meg asks, taking a sip from her teacup.

"No complaints from my clients." I smirk. Lamé joke, I know. But Meg is a sucker for them.

Her laugh is scratchy. “Lucky you. One of my kids has been rather prickly lately.”

“How come?” I give Berta a thankful smile as she leaves our cakes on the table.

“He needs...something new to focus on. I think it’s time,” she replies vaguely. The way she talks about her kids is sometimes strange. But she’s a psychiatrist, probably using unconventional educational methods on her six kids. I mean...*six*. I wonder if she’s a saint, or a Von Trapp family fan.

“Something to focus on. Like a hobby?” I moan around a spoonful of cobbler and ice cream.

She just hums absentmindedly. But she’s eating the cheesecake; I know it’s inconceivable to have a straight thought with that sweetness filling her mouth. We eat in silence for the first few minutes, just thoroughly enjoying our desserts.

“You look tense,” Meg suddenly utters. “I can see the stiffness in your shoulders.”

Because of how easy and comfortable our friendship is, I forget that studying other people’s mind and posture has been her job as a forensic psychiatrist for many years. She’s well-known in the medical field but doesn’t make a big deal about it.

“Hard day at work,” I sigh. “I hate when young people end up on my table. Especially if somebody else put them there.” My stomach twists tightly, making me regret every single piece of cake I’ve eaten. Another tragedy to add to my day.

“I can imagine. You have an empathetic nature that many people fail to grasp.”

I sniff drily. “Not very useful when I can’t do anything but feel like shit.”

“It’s still an extraordinary trait to find in yourself. I can assure you, Michael.” Her lips tilt up for a quick second.

It doesn’t feel like a gift. More like a curse. And anyway, what good does it do? That poor guy is dead. I just hope my autopsy report will help the detectives somehow. The killer hasn’t left any clue on the body once again, though.

“I appreciate the words.”

“Even though they didn’t accomplish anything.” Meg nods, and then breaks out into a coughing fit that jolts her body. A loud, uncontrollable burst of coughs that spurs me to leave my seat and crouch near her to gently stroke her back. She waves her hand to bat me away, but her bent body and red face tell me another story.

I glance at the napkin she has near her mouth and see a red spot forming on the white paper. She speedily squashes it into her hand and away from my eyes. After a long couple of minutes, her coughing fit finally stops. Berta brings the mug with hot water and honey and the wet towel I asked for. I use the latter to cool Meg’s forehead and red cheeks.

Her breath is ragged. There’s a small whizzing sound every time she inhales, but it’s not uncommon to have a dry, sore throat after all that coughing. Her eyes are closed, and her head is leaning against the booth. Some locks of hair have fallen out of her bun, framing her face. Even with the fatigue marring her expression, at her age, she’s still a beautiful woman.

“Would you like some hot water?” I ask her, continuing to stroke the side of her neck with the damp, cold fabric.

She nods and takes the mug and towel from my hand. She moves it on her nape and starts sipping the warm beverage.

“Are you going to tell me? Or do we pretend nothing happened until it happens again?” I say, sliding back on my side of the booth.

Meg keeps drinking. When her cup is empty, she folds the towel neatly and places it on the table. “I have lupus.” Her voice sounds raspy.

“I’m sorry.” Having a chronic disease is a bitch, for lack of a better term. Working in the morgue, I’ve seen firsthand what a long one can do to a human body. Because lupus, like many other autoimmune diseases, has no cure.

“Can I ask what your symptoms are? I can guess chest pain from the cough, and mouth sores from the blood on the napkin.”

“Of course you noticed that.” She huffs, sounding exasperated and strangely proud at the same time. But I feel relieved in part. I thought the blood was coming from her lungs.

“My symptoms have been sporadic, and not that severe. I’m one of the lucky ones, I guess.” Her smile is brief and bitter. “Please don’t aim that compassion my way. You look like a puppy kicked in the stomach by its abusive owner.”

“That’s extremely detailed *and* disturbing. And you just said my empathy is a gift.” I try to make light of the situation. Then something occurs to me.

“That’s why you were at Grand View the day we met. To see Dr. Sallinger.”

She nods. “It’s getting a little harder lately. Can you keep it to yourself, please? My kids know about it, but they can be quite protective.”

That’s kind of sweet. But kids are smart; you can’t hide much from them for a long time. Still, it’s none of my business how Meg wants to deal with her situation.

“Sure,” I easily offer. “But I don’t know them, so...”

She winces for some reason. Does she think I'm upset I haven't met her family yet? Because I'm not. We're friends, but not the kind that you invite to a family barbecue. What I have with Meg is good as it is already. "It's okay. Your secret is safe with me."

"Hippocratic oath?" She stretches her arm toward me.

"Nope," I reply, grabbing her hand and shaking it. "Friend oath."

"I like that." The corner of her mouth kicks up again.

"Dr. Sallinger is a great doctor with an excellent reputation. You're in good hands." I feel the need to tell her this, even though I'm sure she already knows.

She just nods. "Will you keep going with your Mrs. Fletcher marathon tonight?" I know she's trying to change the subject, but I'm a sucker for the centenarian actress from *Murder, She Wrote*, so I let her.

"Yep. I have an appointment with the astute, sweet-looking dame. I'm on season two. How about you? Still immersed in Lieutenant Columbo?"

Meg nods. "Justice is always served with him. It brings me such joy."

"I particularly enjoy how he makes the killer squirm. Slowly pulling the noose around his neck, the killer's crimson blood boiling in his veins from the fear of being caught," I say, dark pleasure lacing my words. When I catch Meg silently studying me, I clear my throat and put a big smile on my face. "His relentless interrogations and nonchalant obtuseness cracks me every time."

She replies with her own grin. "He's a master of disguise. His absentminded behavior lulls the killers into a false sense of security. The mental game of cat and mouse is always very entertaining."

"It is."

“Sometimes I wonder: what if Columbo wasn’t a cop? What if he was a vigilante?” Meg contemplates out loud.

Interesting. “Like a cunning, guileful defender.”

“He takes care of all the vile people who hide in plain sight.”

I like that. “And avenge the forgotten victims.”

“Do you think it’d be wrong of him to do it?” Meg asks.

“It depends.”

“On what?”

I ponder my answer. “His motivations, perhaps.”

“Why do motivations matter if the results are always the same? Getting malevolent people off the street.”

“Because if his motivations are mostly dark, he could get lost in them, and become one of the evils he’s chasing.”

Fuck, this is too close to home for my liking. Being raised Catholic, I have a sinner stigma pushing heavily on my shoulders. And although I don’t believe in the church, the Pope, or even God, the guilty feeling that was fed to me for most of my formative years isn’t easy to shake off. I’m a coroner. A little oddness is expected from me. But the level of wickedness I enjoy is way past society’s standards. And therefore, very wrong.

“So maybe what he needs is someone to keep him grounded. To remind him which path to walk on.” Meg’s voice takes me back to our discussion.

“That would help. But where to find such a person?” I ask rhetorically, taking another spoonful of cheesecake and attempting to enjoy it.

“Where, indeed?” Meg’s smirk disappears behind her tea mug.



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Chapter 3

MICHAEL

An hour later, I'm inside the shop at the corner of my apartment block. My eyes swipe up and down the chips aisle in search of the extra-large bag of sour cream and onion flavor—can't do series marathons without proper junk food. Two bottles of ginger ale are already in my red basket, with a bag of M&M's. I'm followed by Mr. Polinisky's hawk-like gaze. The many mirrors strategically positioned around the convenience store help him keep an eye on the customers while remaining behind the counter. He has grey bushy eyebrows, a round belly, and a permanent suspicious expression on his gruff face.

I hear the ringing sound of the bell over the door announcing a new customer. I've finally found my chips and am tossing a couple of bags in the basket when I feel eyes on me. And I'm not talking about the Polish owner's. I look up and spot the slightly distorted image of a man on one of the round mirrors. He's wearing a black jacket as dark as his hair. The stylish grey sunglasses prevent me from knowing what he's staring at. But

the uneasy sensation of being watched is still making the hair on my forearms stand. Just as I'm about to walk toward the counter he appears in front of me.

He's pulled the sunglasses off and his eyes are the greenest ones I've ever seen. His stare roams over my face... greedily, and a weird sensation hits me for a second. But it goes away quickly when I notice his plump lips, smooth olive skin, high cheekbones, and perfectly styled wavy hair. He looks familiar, and is the most beautiful man I've ever seen. And judging by his glamorous, casual biker style clothes, a rich Mr. Hottie as well.

The jacket is definitely made from lamb skin—if that's even a thing—and his soft-looking light-wash jeans and expensive brown boots give him a bad boy vibe. Fashion is the last thing on my mind, but I can distinguish a pair of high-priced boots from Target ones. He's standing there like Hamlet's father. Still staring unblinkingly, his deep, serious gaze wanders over my features, making me feel a smidge self-conscious.

I kick my eyebrow up at him in a silent '*what is it?*', since words are stuck in my throat. But he remains silent, that extremely acute look zeroed in even tighter on me.

"Can I help you?" My tone is a bit condescending, but his deep scrutiny is unsettling me.

His eyes slide down over my open brown jacket, light blue polo, and khaki pants in such an intense way that has me, and my neglected cock, obviously take notice. He's very handsome, and I'm only human.

Mr. Hottie finally opens his mouth. "Are you a serial killer?" There's not a hint of hilarity on his face.

My mouth goes slack, but I'm still able to utter a, "*What?*"

I'm the serial-killer? He's the one crowding my personal space, measuring me up like... prey. And, crazily, I don't move away.

"Your clothes." He gestures at them, and my head lowers down to fucking look. Again, fashion is not high on the list of essential things in my life. But being compared to a damn serial killer? WTF?

"Would I admit that if I was?" I reply sassily, tangled with annoyance. And there's nothing wrong with my... okay, slightly boring clothes.

He cocks his head in an almost animalistic, curious way. His jade eyes study me closely. "Probably not. But serial killers are usually eager to... share their work." Why does every word he's saying sounds like it's a double entendre? Because I'm fucking sick.

Wait. Is he a cop? No, too high-class. A serial killer aficionado? That doesn't scare me as much as it should. "Touché."

"Oh, I will." He bites his lower lip and gives me a blazing look, like I'm a piece of juicy steak he wants to sink those teeth into.

What's happening? I didn't just imagine that, right? "Pardon me?"

Displaying his perfect white teeth, he suddenly smiles, but it looks more predatory than anything else.

"You must know your haughty voice is boner-inducing. You're flirting with me."

He takes a step forward and I feel like I'm on an episode of *The Twilight Zone*—the one where the human is abducted and fucked all night by an alien. Yes, please.

"Come again?"

"Mmm, not yet. But I will make you again, and again, and... again," he says deliberately slowly. His sensual purring makes me shiver. Desire like I've never felt before runs down my spine, but I hope I'm good enough at

hiding it behind a trembling smirk. I move the plastic basket in front of my growing dick, placing it in the small space between us.

“D-does that line ever work?” I scoff. I already know it does, because it’s fucking working on me. But although I’m not against one-night stands with gorgeous, charming dudes, I still don’t want to be too easy. Look too eager. His hand grabs the shelf near my head, and he comes impossibly closer, pushing his body against my basket more forcibly. I feel the sting of the metal handle sinking into my hip.

“Can’t conceal the hunger in your eyes.” He smirks back, and damn that crooked tilt of his lips must have hooked and sunk into a lot of prey. Me included. But I’ll try to keep this unfazed pretense for a few more minutes...seconds. My pride is, unfortunately, demanding it. “Or hide the hard interest inside those horrific pants of yours,” he continues.

His hand grabs my wrist, and, at the contact, fucking sparks rush down my arm. His eyes bore into mine, taking my breath away. His grip tightens, and I know something is about to happen between us when somebody yells, “Don’t you fucking move!”

My body turns stiff as a board and I tilt my head to the left, looking at the person standing behind Mr. Hottie’s muscular shoulders. There’s a man with a nylon stocking stretched over his face, which makes his nose oddly flat and his features impossible to detect. And he’s holding a gun. He keeps waving it between us and Mr. Polinsky, who’s still behind the counter.

“Hands up,” he then orders us. The bushy owner begrudgingly lifts his heavy palms near his head, while Mr. Hottie has yet to move. His body is still facing me, giving his back to the robber. He only turns his head toward him. I can see an annoyed expression on the perfect profile of his face.

“Are you deaf? Hands up!” the robber yells at us, making me flinch.

His voice is muffled by the nylon wrapping his face, but I can understand him well. I try to shake off the fear that floods me, just enough to place the basket on the floor and raise my hands. But Mr. Hottie's grip on my wrist has tightened, and I'm able to lift only one palm up. He turns slowly toward the robber, keeping his body partly in front of mine. One of his hands goes up, while the other slides down to lace his fingers through mine. And although the gesture is too intimate for two perfect strangers, it's also comforting.

The robber throws a bag at Mr. Polinisky, nervously ordering him to fill it with cash and some of the Snicker's bars near the cash register.

I can't believe I'm being held at gun point in a convenience store. It feels like one of those out-of-body experiences I've read about somewhere. When your mind is in so much shock you feel like you're floating on the ceiling Casper-style, looking down at yourself. The frantic heartbeat and cold sweats keep sucking me back into my body, though.

Now all the detective TV series I like should help me somehow. What would Jessica Fletcher do? Follow the perp's instructions while taking in as many details as she can. I take a big breath. The robber's face is covered, but it's clear that the long black wool coat is too big for him. Old, but good quality. Average sneakers. Some kind of tattoo on his hand. The coat's cuff is in the way, making it impossible to see.

Mr. Hottie's hand squeezing mine pulls me out of my mental examination. "Stay close to me," he whispers.

I frown at him. "Where would I go?" Maybe my confusion is due to the situation. But really, where could I possibly go?

"Nowhere." He turns his intense gaze on me, and for a moment, it feels like his words have a deeper meaning. The shudder bolting down my spine isn't

caused by fright this time.

“Now, your turn.” The guy holding the gun steps forward and then throws the bag full of cash two feet away from us. “Put all your values in the bag.”

Values?

“Fucking amateur.” I hear Mr. Hottie mumbling, but he isn’t going nervously through his pockets like I am. He’s simply staring at the robber—more making a hole in his head with his eyes—and the guy seems a bit intimidated, even though *he’s* the one holding a gun.

“Y-you first,” the guy instructs me, pointing the slightly trembling weapon at my chest.

I give a hard swallow, and then hold up the wallet in my trembling hand. I’m about to toss it in the bag when the robber stops me.

“No. Come closer,” he says. “And empty all your pockets!”

“I only have my house and work keys, nothing else,” I explain to him. And *fuck* I don’t want him to come visit me at home next.

“Everything! Hurry up!” he screams.

Okay. I take a big breath and attempt to step forward, but Mr. Hottie’s fingers tighten around my hand. Right, I told him I’ll stay close. But can’t he see the guy has a gun? And guns win. Always fucking win!

“Let him go.” The robber’s attention is on Mr. Hottie now. And his pistol’s muzzle, too.

“No.”

My head snaps toward the gorgeous, but crazy, dude next to me.

“I’ll shoot you in the face. Let. His. Hand. Go,” the guy barks.

“Still a no.”

Who’s this unperturbed, fearless demigod? And how is he managing to turn my briefs into a melting mess twice within minutes?

“Keep your damn hands up, you old geezer!” the robber suddenly yells at Mr. Polinisky. Then he turns to us again. “You think I won’t do it? ‘Coz I fucking will!” He sounds pissed, and if he didn’t have that thing around his head, I’m sure spit would have flown out of his mouth.

“Hard to do that with the safety on.” Mr. Hottie tilts his chin at the gun.

The robber automatically looks at it, and that’s when Mr. Hottie strikes. He propels forward, grabs the gun and... I can’t see the rest. Because he didn’t let go of my hand straight away, and abruptly pulled me forward with him, making me trip into the basket laying on the floor. Flapping my arms in a desperate attempt to find my balance again, I sway to the left, whimpering when an acute pain hits my ankle, and grab at the first thing I find. The robber’s head. Fuck my life!

The nylon makes my fingers slip, and I’m dangerously tilting toward the floor. Following my self-preservation instinct, I let my nails sink into the black fabric and tear it. Three bloody scratches appear on the robber’s screaming face, and a satisfied smirk attempts to curve my lips when I’m forcibly yanked away by the back of my jacket. Part of my weight falls on my hurting ankle, and I moan in pain before my back drops against a hard chest.

I hear the store bell ringing and get only a glance of the robber running into the dark while the angry owner follows him outside, holding a huge baseball bat.

“What’s wrong?” Mr. Hottie’s breath is in my ear, making my terrified heart start galloping for a completely different reason.

“My left ankle. I twisted it,” I explain. He drops the gun in the bag the robber left behind, shifts near me, and lifts me easily off my feet.

I let out a high-pitched, embarrassing squeak and hurriedly hook my arms behind his head. He smells like expensive cologne and warm leather. And something else that is tempting me to lower my head and nuzzle his neck to find out. The macho display ends rather quickly. He gently helps me sit down on a plastic chair near the counter, and then moves a heavy brown carton and places it under my foot to keep it lifted.

“Thank you,” I say breathily.

His nod lets me know he heard me, but his attention is all focused on his phone. I pull the left leg of my pants up to check on my ankle. And damn, it’s already getting swollen. I turn it left and right, biting hard on my fisted hand to stop my whimper.

“Here.” Mr. Hottie lays a bag of frozen peas on it, making me hiss. But the cold is actually helping with the pain.

“Thanks...”

“Raphael,” he says. Even his name is posh.

“I’m Michael.”

“Michael.” He repeats it slowly, like he’s savoring the sound on his tongue, while his eyes are doing that intense stare again. Taking every detail in. It’s overwhelming and exhilarating at the same time.

His phone vibrates and, after checking it, his eyes fall on my hand. “You’re bleeding.” He sounds angry, but his grip around my fingers is light.

“It’s not my blood. I scratched the guy’s face,” I tell him.

He smiles at me. And my breath gets sucked away. He’s stunning.

“Attaboy.”

I gasp at hearing his praise for some obscure reason.

He disappears for a few seconds, leaving me utterly confused and feeling all tingly inside. When he comes back, he’s holding a few things in his hands.

Crouching down next to me, he pulls a small cotton swab out of a bag, and, gripping my hand again, he starts scraping under my nails, positioning a small plastic bag under it.

“Mmm, you shouldn’t touch it. The police could find some DNA from under my nails, and it’d be easier for them to... identify the robber.” But that’s exactly what he’s doing. Gathering evidence. He keeps going, ignoring me, and I don’t pull my hand back. But I should... right?

“I’m a forensic pathologist,” I say instead.

He stops and looks at me. Those juicy lips are lifted on one side, and the crooked effect makes my balls draw tight. This guy has a weird power over my body. And by the smug expression on his face, I guess he knows it. He doesn’t seem put off by my job, which usually makes people wary around me.

He lets go of my hand and seals the cotton swabs inside plastic bags before pushing them in his pocket. I want to ask him about that, but Mr. Polinsky is back.

“Bastard!” he swears. I guess he didn’t catch the robber. He makes a spitting noise.

“Police is coming,” he states in a very strong Slavic-accented voice.

Raphael’s body seems to stiffen for a second. “The ambulance is coming, as well,” he tells me.

“That’s not necessary...” I start, but he cuts me off.

“Are you hurt somewhere else?” He slides his eyes up and down my body, making me almost tremble like a schoolgirl. His concerned attention strangely soothes me.

“No, and my ankle is only sprained. I don’t need...”

“Yes, you do. Now sit tight, babe. I see the lights of a police car coming.”

Babe?

He softly kisses the palm of my hand before standing up and walking toward the two officers. My gaze follows his tight, juicy ass, but my mind is replaying the kiss in slow motion. His bright, vivid green eyes lifting to mine and then closing to completely revel the moment when his soft, warm lips made contact with my skin.

I felt his hot breath on my hand for a swift moment—I fist my fingers, stupidly trying to capture it and push it under my skin. I want those lips on me. Want to taste them. All of him. But the burn in my ankle reminds me what will happen. I'll give my statement. Go home. Shower. Rest. And wallow in my loneliness.

I grab my phone and call Grand View, letting the pathology department know that I won't be able to come in for a few days.

A few minutes later, Raphael and the officers stop in front of me. They take my name and ask me what happened. I try to give a precise retelling of the events, but it's not easy with Raphael's body pushing against my shoulder. Or having the amazing smell of his leather jacket mixed with his scent entering my nose.

When I tell them about the scratches I caused on the robber's face, I feel Raphael's body pushing harder against me.

"Right, Mr. Bear-Stone gave us the sample. A bit unusual, but he told us you're a forensic pathologist."

Sample? Singular? I'm pretty sure he took three. When I look up at Raphael, I see something in his eyes that makes me keep my mouth shut about the extra samples. It's not intimidation, it's... a demand to trust him? Maybe the shock is finally kicking in and I'm hearing and seeing things.

A paramedic materializes in front of me and starts checking my ankle. I tell him that it's just a sprain and that I'm a doctor—Doctor Death, some of the nurses at the hospital call me, but I still went to med school. He smiles condescendingly. It's true that doctors are the worst patients, but his services really aren't needed. After a short while, he leaves.

“Both your stories check out with the owner's. The store cameras seem to have malfunctioned during the time of the attempted robbery,” the blonde officer says.

Weird. Did the robber have an accomplice?

“The guy didn't wear gloves, so we'll also get his fingerprints from the bag he left behind.”

I nod. No gloves, but he managed to take out the cameras?

“One more thing. Dr. Caldwell, you work close by at the Grand View hospital, correct?” the taller cop asks me, looking at his notes.

“Yes. I was going home when I stopped to buy some food,” I reply.

“Do you live around here?”

“The building two doors down.”

He nods and writes some more on his notepad. I had no idea police still use those, but these guys are probably in their sixties, so, technology-wise, that makes perfect sense.

“And you, Mr. Bear-Stone, what are you doing in this area?”

Mr. Bear-Stone... What a name. Everything about him is fancy. Raphael Bear-Stone. Wait, as in Bear-Stone Labs? Fuck! He's the young president of the research company. I've seen that same face on the cover of a medical magazine. He's not big on interviews, even though his company has made groundbreaking discoveries in the field of pathology and developed

revolutionary pharmaceutical remedies. That's why he looked familiar. I'm a big fan of his brother and his research work.

"I went to Paolo's, the pizza place near here, with a friend. Just got here to grab a drink before heading back home, Officer... Peters." Raphael reads the name on the cop's uniform with a monotone voice. No trace of a smile on his lips anymore. "And could you please try and keep my name out of this?"

"Your actions were reckless, Mr. Bear-Stone. But you took part in disarming a robber and possibly saved lives. Don't you want people to know that?"

"No, and Dr. Caldwell helped," he just replies.

Tripping on top of a robber is not "helping." It's the start of a disaster that miraculously didn't end badly.

"I have enough attention on me as it is. I'd prefer if the police could be discreet about it."

"Right," the cop mutters, sounding surprised. And, I have to admit, I'm a little surprised too.

Raphael throws him the same icy, intimidating stare he gave to the robber before. It shockingly has the same effect.

The cop averts his eyes and clears his throat. "We'll do our best."

His partner steps in and takes our phone numbers. He also tells us to go to the precinct in a few days to give our statements before we're finally free to go.



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Chapter 4

MICHAEL

Raphael is helping me up from the chair, when Mr. Polinisky shoves a plastic bag containing my chips, chocolate, and bottles of ginger ale into my chest, and two beers toward Raphael. He nods at us and then goes back behind the counter. I think that's the best thank you we could get from the standoffish owner.

"I'll take you home," Raphael states. Without waiting for my answer, he slides the beers in my bag and curls his muscular arm around my back. With his hand firmly gripping my hip, we slowly walk outside. This is better than being lifted like a fragile little thing, and I can still enjoy his intoxicating scent.

"Which way?" he asks.

"Left." I try to keep the wince of pain off my face. The blood is rushing to my ankle again, and it feels like it has its own pulsing heartbeat. "Such a stupid injury. I had a damn gun pointed at my face and I hurt myself tripping on my own feet."

“You made him bleed, babe.”

The praise makes me feel giddy.

“And it was so damn worth it. I wish I did more damage, though.” Much more. I remember the drops of blood running down his face, and I grunt. Raphael tightens his arm and pulls more of my weight against his body, mistakenly taking my noise as a sign of pain. Biting my inner cheek, I try to focus on the few feet left.

“I’d have loved to see it.” His voice sounds gruff and heated, it keeps doing thing to my breathing.

When we reach the building door, I pull out the keys and suddenly remember about my wallet. I dropped it on the store floor. Fuck.

“My wallet...” I start, looking back toward the store.

“I have it. Give me the keys.” His bossy ways should irritate me more. But instead, I find myself slightly aroused.

When we stop in front of the stairs at the building entrance, I attempt to take a step up. But he stops me, splaying a warm hand on my chest.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Up? I live on the fourth floor. The elevator is Big-Bang-Theory out of order,” I retort with a huff.

“You can’t with that ankle. Here.” He lets me go. After making sure I grab hold of the handrail, he gives me his back and then crouches in front of me.

“Piggy-back? For real?”

Again, who is this guy? The many facets of him hint at a very complex personality. A headache-inducing one. And yet I want to know more.

“Yep. Come on, piglet. Hop on.” He winks back at me.

“You’re ridiculous.” I snort, but still curl my arms and legs around his body. The plastic bag hangs from my fingers against his chest. His wide back

feels solid against me. My jacket is open, and his warmth penetrates my skin through the remaining layers between us. He slides his hands under my thighs, too slowly not to be on purpose. And I can't halt a delicious shiver rocking my body. His fingers tighten around my legs, letting me know he felt my reaction to his sensual touch. This feels like foreplay to me. Oh dear, wishful thinking.

After two floors, he's panting slightly. But he's carrying almost double his weight, so I'm very impressed.

"Fuck, you're heavy, piglet," he complains, starting a new flight of stairs. But his hands glide a little more toward my butt.

"Need to stop for a few minutes, Mr. Hottie?" I blurt his nickname out.

I named him Mr. Hottie while he chose... *piglet*? I'm not as brawny as he is, even though he looks more like a swimmer than a tank. But I run five miles every other day and do some pushups... when I feel like it. My weight mainly consists of muscles and bones.

I hear the smile in his voice. "This Mr. Hottie has plans for your... piglet-y sexy body."

I scoff sardonically, but my thigh muscles reflexively jerk, and my mind gets bombarded by dirty images of Raphael and I tangled together.

"If I haven't been clear enough, I will fuck you." The confidence in his words makes me gasp.

My mouth is as arid as a damn desert, but I manage a sassy response. "Your ego needs a bigger space than this building. But I'm afraid not even this whole city is large enough."

"It doesn't change the truth, babe," he states.

"And what's that?"

"That you'll be screaming under me."

My forehead falls on his shoulder and I take a big breath to clear my temporarily lust-fogged brain.

“Your boldness astonishes me. Are you always this arrogant?” The words are harsh, but the breathless and needy voice attached to them tells a different story. My insides are screaming to grab Raphael tighter and get started. Yeah, my body is an eager 24/7 slut.

“Yes,” he simply says.

“Do people just accept that?”

He turns his head my way. That predatory smile is painted on his lips again.

“People do whatever I say. And anyway, my mind doesn’t follow conventional norms, babe.”

What does that even mean?

“I don’t care if you’re King Midas or King Kong. You can’t just tell me we’ll... *do it* and expect me to comply,” I counter.

We finally reach my floor landing. Raphael leans backward and I reluctantly untangle myself from his strong body. As soon as my good foot is on the brown linoleum, he’s on me. He grabs my left leg—firm, but gentle enough not to hurt my ankle—and hoists it up on his hip. My back finds the hard wall while we are chest to chest. His addictive scent, the hard planes of his body and his fingers gripping a fistful of my hair make me dizzy.

“Oh, but you will.” He nips my ear, making me whimper. “Picture this, I’m behind you. My hand is wrapped around your leaking, throbbing dick. And I’m jerking you off while railing your bouncing, tight ass. So. Damn. Hard. Over and over.” His detailed description sends a bolt of fire down my body to my hard-as-a-rock dick. And I *am* picturing it. Can almost feel it. Him, moving inside me.

“We’ll be so fucking good, babe,” he growls into my ear while thrusting his hips forward. There are clothes between us, but I can feel his stiff cock rubbing against mine, and God, I want it. So badly. Don’t care if he’s the most arrogant man I’ve ever met. Because I’ve never felt this level of lust toward another guy before.

He pulls on my hair, tilting my head to the side. I barely notice the plastic bag falling from my fingers on the floor with a thud, because his lips are feather-like as they brush my neck, his breath hot on the sensitive skin.

“Would you like that? To be stuffed with cock? With *my* cock?”

And I can feel it’s a very big one. He bites my earlobe hard, and a burst of electricity rushes down from there to my spine. I can’t reply. I can’t even swallow anymore. My breath is chopped and broken. My nails dig into his shoulders, surely leaving half-moon indents in his skin. That seems to spur him on.

His fingers move up, getting a bruising handful of my asscheek, squeezing it harder. Fuck, yes. I wish we were naked, to feel each one of those fingertips sinking into my skin.

I shift, attempting to push him closer to me, but I jostle my ankle, and a painful whimper escapes from my lips. He turns rigid against me, and then leans back. Fucking *away* from me. His dark, hungry eyes study my face. He’s so damn beautiful. I’m about to pull him back and suck on those red lips for the first time, when he takes a step back. He sighs, stroking his face. That’s when reality punches me right in the gut. What the fuck just happened? I was humping a guy in the hallway of my apartment building. Where all my neighbors could see me. An overbearing, bossy guy I barely know and with whom I just shared a very dangerous experience. This is so

out of character for me. Maybe it's the shock causing my neurons to misfire inside my brain.

I open my palms on the wall behind me, enjoying the coolness for a second and letting it ground me in my surroundings. Then, pushing myself away, I hop on one foot toward my door, gritting my teeth as I try not to look at Raphael. It's the first one on the right, so he has no time to try and help me. He still has my keys and quickly makes use of them. I always leave the entrance light on—hate dark rooms. It's narrow and small, but Raphael finds a way to curl his arm around my waist and takes me to the dark green Ikea couch in the living room. My apartment is sparsely furnished. I spend a lot of time outside, so a few pieces of furniture and a couple of mementos are the only things decorating the room.

Raphael stands there, looking around silently. After a minute, the silence gets uncomfortable.

"You probably have to go take care of important... millionaire stuff." I try to give him an opening, but he doesn't take it.

"You recognized me?" He seems surprised. Maybe he's not used to it?

"We both work in the medical world, and your company is well-known." I shrug, since I don't really care about notoriety.

"I see." His face turns blank. "Yes, I'm a busy man."

"Oh." I fail to hide my disappointment. Because I don't want him to leave. But since my body is not up for sex, there's no reason for Raphael to stay.

"Of course. Ummm, thanks for all your help. And you know, saving my life. Also, I'm a fan of your brother's work, and your company's results. So, mhm, yeah, thanks for that too." And I'm rambling.

"Where's the bathroom?" he asks, completely ignoring my words.

"The first door on the right." I point him toward it.

He disappears behind it, and I find myself staring at the space where he was standing. This guy is an enigma. He's demanding and flirty, powerful and gentle. All-consuming. Already taking up too much space in my head. I've just met him, and he's already inside my apartment. Well, he actually saved my life so I can probably trust him. Is that why I feel a pull toward him? At times it almost feels like I've met him already. But I know I haven't.

Fuck, I'm tired and feel filthy, and in fucking pain. I need a hot shower, but Raphael is still in the bathroom.

After another long while, I can't stand it anymore. I awkwardly find my way to the bedroom, grabbing at furniture and holding myself on the walls while trying not to face-plant on the floor. I take a few comfy clothes out of the dresser and drop them on the bed, bringing only a shirt with me.

The en suite bathroom's light flickers, reminding me that I need to change it. I lock the door behind me and pull off my pants. It takes longer than usual, and I huff annoyingly at my stupid foot. I yank the polo off and avoid my reflection in the mirror while stepping inside the shower. The water cascading on my shoulders feels good, but I can't completely enjoy the soothing feeling due to my aching ankle. I wash and dry myself very quickly, putting the red cotton shirt back on, but leaving it unbuttoned. Then I wrap a towel around my waist before hopping toward the door.

I probably should've waited for Raphael to finish and said my goodbyes. But I really needed to wash tonight's happening off my body. And the truth is that I feel a prickle of uneasiness at the thought of him leaving. Preposterous, I know. This whole evening has felt surreal to me from the moment I laid my eyes on him.

I unlock the door and pull on the knob, and then freeze when I find the man who took a front seat to my thoughts standing in front of me. With a frown

on his face. His leather jacket is gone, arms crossed over his chest in a delicious display of bulging biceps. His feet are bare. *What?*

“You should have waited for me! You could have slipped and broken your arm, or even your neck.” He scolds me while his eyes travel down my bare torso. I suck in a breath, his gaze feeling like a physical touch. He doesn’t stop ogling my chest. “You have hair,” he whispers, sounding confused and out of breath.

I look at my pecs, peppered with blond hair. Doesn’t he like chest hair? I have only a few—not a Robin Williams rug. Is it the light color he doesn’t like?

“Fuck!” I hear him swear, and in the next moment he’s on me again. His hand curls loosely around my throat. The other falls on my waist, gripping the towel. This time, his nose is touching mine, and his green irises are so close my eyes are crossing. Or perhaps it’s the feel of his mouth brushing against mine. Not kissing... yet. My tongue comes out to slick my lips and accidentally touches his. The fingers around my throat tighten slightly, and I’m gasping for air at the hard look filling his eyes.

“Michael.” He hisses my name as both a reproach and a dirty promise. Then his teeth are on my lower lip, biting and pulling the flesh. And Jesus, I want him to tear off my towel and fuck me right here, standing against my bathroom door.

He lets go of my lip and looks straight into my dilated pupils. “Your ass will be mine. But not tonight. Not when you can barely stand. You need to recover for what I have in mind.”

My body visibly deflates at his words. But tingles shoot down my balls when his tongue slowly licks the sting he caused. As soon as he’s done, I pull my aching, lower lip into my mouth, eager to taste him. And fuck, I

want more. Still can't believe I'm salivating like a St. Bernard over a stranger.

I nod jerkily as I'm still trying to get my brain to work correctly. "So bossy." It's the only thing that I'm able to utter.

"You have no idea, babe. No more locking doors."

A shiver rolls down my spine and I blink a couple of times, trying to restart some of my brain cells.

Raphael takes me to the edge of the bed where I sit. Then he grabs the sweats and t-shirt I left on the mattress, leaving the briefs behind. Down on his knees at my feet, he then helps me into the pants.

"Briefs?" I ask him while he's pulling the cotton fabric over my legs. Even though my foot throbs, his obsequious position gives my filthy imagination new scenarios I want so badly to turn into reality.

"You don't need them," he states without lifting his eyes up from his task. His black hair looks so luscious I feel the urge to run a hand through it.

"I don't?" I smile down at him, even though he can't see me.

"Nope. Just like you don't need a hideous, punch-in-the-eye shirt. But I'll allow it for tonight. If you keep it open," he says matter-of-factly.

"You will allow it. Okay, your domineering act is getting a little excessive. And this shirt is fine." I try to sound assertive, but the truth is that I'm tired and...

"You like it."

He's right, I do. But the rapid pace of whatever is happening between us is disconcerting. Scary, even. And at the same time feels natural. How is that even possible?

He quickly gets rid of the towel around my waist and his eyes fall on my half-hard cock. He bites down on his lower lip, and my mind conjures a

thousand pornographic images involving that slick mouth. But then he finishes fixing my pants and passes me a glass of water and a couple of pills.

“Drink.”

They look like painkillers, and, when I glance to my left, I spot the bottle of medicine on the nightstand. He must have found them in the kitchen cupboard. I frown at the thought of him rifling through my things. But even though it bothers me, I’m too exhausted and not annoyed enough to care. Painkillers always have a strong effect on me, but my ankle is hurting like a bitch, so I swallow them without argument and finish the water.

“Attaboy.”

That praise again, followed by his crooked smile, gets me right in the chest. A warm sensation fills me, and my cheeks are suddenly hot.

We move to the living room. He’s emptied the convenience store bag on the counter; after grabbing a bag of chips and drinks, he sits next to me on the sofa.

“What are we watching?” He lifts his feet next to mine on the square coffee table and stretches his arm on the back of the sofa behind my head. His thicker thigh pushes against mine, and I have to fight the desire to lay my head on his pec. He smells so damn good.

“You’re staying.” My statement sounds dubious to my own ears.

“Yeah. Can’t get rid of me again.” *Again?* “You like thrillers?” he asks me, scrolling down my Netflix account. He looks completely at ease in my living room. On my couch. Near me.

“Detective stories.”

“You have that in common with my mother,” he casually says. And I suddenly feel the need to know more about him.

“You have a brother, right?”

“Yes.”

“I follow his incredible work.” I can’t hide the excitement from my voice.

“One brother. And four foster brothers. You?”

“Wow. That sounds nice and crowded.”

He just makes a throaty sound.

“I’m an only child, but always wanted a brother,” I admit. “Although, I’m not an easy person to go along with.”

“What do you mean?”

Raphael has abandoned his search on the screen, and all his attention is on me now. It’s overwhelming to feel those deep jade eyes zeroing in on my face, like they are trying to dig up my soul to examine it thoroughly.

“I’m in the death business. And I chose it voluntarily.”

“Why?”

Nobody has ever asked me that. Probably not interested enough or too grossed out by my hypothetical reply. I decide to go for partial honesty, since I don’t know Raphael. “It’s peaceful. I have total control over it. And I can discover many things about my patients without having to hear it from them. Their bodies will tell me. They’re a map I can use to find hints leading from their life to their death.”

“A mystery that needs to be solved. Like one of those detective stories,” he finally says, pointing at the TV screen after a few seconds of silence. There’s no judgment in his sexy gruff voice.

“I’m a coroner for the hospital. The deaths are mostly caused by disease or, worst case scenario, malpractice.”

“Mostly?” he asks, leaning toward me.

And all the oxygen has suddenly disappeared with his closeness. My tingling body reminds me that those fuckable lips were on mine a few minutes ago.

“The ER doctors can’t save everybody, and the dead bodies ending on my table are the result of accidents or violence,” I manage to pathetically whisper, scratching my nape in a nervous gesture. His inscrutable eyes are following every movement I make. His gaze feels like a cool mental lick on my heated skin, and I relish the attention.

“Anyway, I always thought that having a brother would be cool,” I blurt out.

“What makes you think that?” I can hear the curiosity in his voice.

“I always had this vision of brothers as allies who stick around. Who stay, even when there are—” I swallow “—differences.” Fuck, why am I making myself so vulnerable in front of him? Giving hints about such a sore part of my private life?

“Where’s your family?” he asks unblinkingly.

“My parents died a year ago. I have nobody else.” I smile awkwardly with a shrug, averting my eyes. But I feel too raw to hold his searching stare.

“You do.”

Surprised by his firm words, my eyes jump to his.

His hand moves from the sofa to cup my face. His thumb strokes my swollen lower lip reverently. I can see the satisfaction in his gaze at the sight of the teeth marks he left on me. And that turns me on like a firecracker in July. All self-pity forgotten.

His sparkly green orbs lift to mine. “You need to belong. To be claimed, marked,” he whispers. “Roughened up, dominated. Eh, babe?”

Am I that transparent? A squeaky embarrassing noise leaves my mouth. Seems like I've lost the ability to speak.

"I will own you, Michael. All of your hot body, piglet."

I let out a snort of irritation. "Really?"

"Very hot," he says, smirking wickedly.

"I know I am. I'm talking about the piglet part!"

"What about it?" he says absentmindedly. His eyes tracking the gentle trail of his thumb on my cheek, going down toward my neck. "Your skin is so pink and pale. Smooth and delicate. I want..." His phone starts vibrating on the coffee table, halting his words. The name Rami appears on the screen.

He grabs it. "Done?" Raphael says into the phone.

I can hear a person talking on the other side. The voice is too low for me to understand, but it's a man.

"Paolo's Pizza, three blocks away, with Rague. Yeah. Detective Peterson and Garder. Hmm, not very cooperative. Fuck off!" He swears at the end, but it doesn't have any heat behind it. "Michael Caldwell." Raphael's eyes find mine. The voice on the other end raises. "I'm with him now, dickface! I know. Stop that. Okay, but fucking behave." He moves the phone away from his ear and pushes on the speaker button. "Michael, virtually meet Rami, my foster brother."

"Oh." I can't hide my surprise. "Hello," I lamely say.

A husky voice comes from the other line. "Hello, Michael. I heard you've been part of a stressful circumstance."

"Yes," I answer, riding the obvious train.

"You're a forensic pathologist. Moved to Chicago on February the 20th, working at Grand View. Adopted. Only child. Parents deceased..."

“Rami!” Raphael growls at the same time I ask, “How the hell do you know all that?”

“I know much more. And can find out the rest. But you’ve become a person I’m very interested in, Michael,” he replies unapologetically.

“Why? I’m extremely boring, except maybe my job, which I can assure you is not as intriguing as in the movies. My life is pretty uneventful. Tonight has been the most action I had in a while.” And the ramble is back.

“Prepare to have tons of it, babe.” Raphael’s suggestive smile makes me blush, even after what almost happened a minute ago. I try to cover it with a roll of my eyes, but my inner slut is waiting for his commands.

“Babe?” Rami sounds surprised by Raphael’s endearment toward me.

Still, *Nobody puts Baby in a corner*, “You don’t sound like a cop. And the inhumanly fast tapping noise I’m hearing tells me you’re very good with computers.”

Raphael smiles proudly at me, gripping my nape in a gentle squeeze. All that’s missing is the *attaboy*. Damn! I’ve turned into a praise bitch.

“You see? Interesting,” Rami retorts. “Serena, mute the keyboard, please.”

Now who’s Serena?

“Done, Rami,” a warm, smooth female voice promptly replies.

Whatever. “Look, I’m just addicted to Hercule Poirot’s investigations and his connoisseur mustache. Nothing more,” I quip.

“Oh fuck! Not another one,” Rami mutters.

“Another what?” I ask confused.

“Self-made, justice-seeker sucker.” Raphael’s foster brother sighs.

“That’s a hurtful statement based on a very limited interaction,” I counter, stressing my outrage in every word.

“Rami, shut it!” Goosebumps erupt all over my arms at Raphael’s rumblingly snarl.

“You don’t have to go all growly on me, Raph.”

“Then stop being an asshole.” He keeps the growl.

“Reading my life on a screen doesn’t tell you who I am,” I scoff.

“Well... technically that’s not entirely correct. And all those sour cream and onion chips you eat aren’t good for your reflux,” Rami snickers.

How...? Damn credit cards! Is he a hacker? “I don’t have reflux!”

“You’ll get it if you keep eating like that.”

“You sound like Miss Ellison, my sixth-grade teacher. She smelled like egg, and I hated her,” I deadpan, not enjoying Rami’s laugh at all. “What the fuck is this? Why are you even checking me?” I turn my glare to Raphael.

“Is it some kind of precaution because you’re Scrooge-McDuck rich?”

“And president of a big ass company.” Rami sounds condescending.

“An NDA would have sufficed,” I tell both of them.

“No. Fuck, Rami, enough!” Raphael sounds pissed.

“You know I have to do a background check, bro. No exceptions.”

So, what I always thought about rich people is true. They are crazy.

“Don’t fucking care about the rules. Not this time.”

“Raph, it’s not only about you...”

“Rami, glove collection,” Raphael threatens him—I think. I mean, *gloves*?

What’s that about?

A gasp comes through the line. “You wouldn’t.”

“Is it a Michael Jackson thing, or more on the kinky side?” I whisper... loudly. “Fuck, I said it out loud. The painkillers always loosen my tongue.”

“Do they?” Raphael smiles like the Grinch with an evil plan.

“Yes, they do. It’s like there’s no time between forming my thoughts and opening my mouth.” I realize I said that out loud too, just by looking at Raphael’s amused expression. “Gloves?” I abruptly yell, trying to take the fire away from me.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Rami sniffs.

“Yes, that’s why I asked you, assface.” Oops. Too much?

“I like you, Michael. You have big *cojones*,” Rami says, surprisingly.

“Back off,” Raphael grunts, and damn, that’s so hot.

“Apart from the huge violation of my privacy, I still think you’re an assface.” Am I making any sense?

“At least my pee doesn’t stink. I mean, with the amount of asparagus you buy, your house must be a biohazard site.”

I want to tell Rami to fuck off, and then list the diuretic property of said vegetable, but my eyelashes are starting to droop. Damn painkillers. I sway slightly to the right, before Raphael pushes me back to him. His firm chest is suddenly under my cheek, and the sound of his heartbeat reverberates in my ear like the sweetest lullaby. I moan, snuggling closer to his heart, loving the feel of his hand running through my hair.

Raphael brings his phone to his ear again, but I can clearly understand Rami’s words now.

“What are you doing?”

“Leave it alone.”

“Alright.” Rami sighs. “Are you sure you want to talk to her alone, Raph?”

Raph. I like it. It makes him more... human.

“Yes,” Raph answers. “Don’t tell her about Michael yet.”

Is he talking about me?

“Why? What are you keeping from us?”

The rest of the conversation fades away. The knowledge that Raph is here, in addition to the painkillers' effect, cause my brain to relax. And I crash surprisingly fast. My dreams are chaotic, filled with intense, jade green eyes, and a pink, scruffy stuffed pig with one red button.

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Chapter 5

RAPHAEL

I take an insane amount of pleasure in sleeping next to Michael. The last time I actually shared a bed was with Sari when I was a kid. It was induced by fear—on his part—certainly not enjoyment. Not like this morning. And it's...odd.

My aversion and disinterest for others on top of my inability to keep focus usually push me to pursue new *ventures*. For the most part, out of tedium.

But not with Michael. I always want to be able to touch him. To feel him all over me. To slice my body open and push him in the deepest part of me.

The connection between us is so fucking rare. Like nothing I have ever felt.

I'm fascinated by him. Obsessively. My whole being, it's zeroed in on him.

I can't take my eyes off his lean body moving against mine in his sleep. His sweet ass stroking my morning wood between those plump cheeks fucking perfectly. I'm wearing only my briefs, while he still has that ugly shirt and his worn sweats on. Feeling the fabric barriers between us, I regret not having taken them off when I put him to bed.

I'm a couple of inches taller than him, just the right height for my nose to sink into his shiny, wheat-blond hair. Like everything about him, it's short and neat. The spicy, warm scent of pachouli filling my lungs is surprising. I thought he'd choose a milder fragrance for himself. But it weirdly fits him, and I fucking like those unexpected aspects I'm learning about him.

My arm is trapped under his head, cushioning his soft cheek. I trail my other hand up his thigh, reaching the hem of his shirt and moving it aside. His skin is warm and soft to the touch. My fingers brush lightly over his flat belly, going up to trace each rib on the right side. The hair covering his pec is incredibly soft. When I get to his nipple, I give it a hard tug, and Michael whimpers lightly, pushing his sweet butt more firmly on my throbbing cock. I glance down at his hurting foot placed on a cushion at the end of the bed. It still looks puffy, and a purple bruise covers the thin skin on top, spreading over the ankle.

If he was anybody else, I'd just fuck him and forget about him. My no-strings-attached way of life includes no names—not even words if I can help it—and no fucks given. I just want to selfishly satisfy my own carnal needs.

This desire I'm feeling has nothing to do with that. Michael is a whole different thing. An inescapable temptation that has burnt inside of my chest from the moment I saw him sitting opposite Meg in that diner. Stretching those fuck-me lips in a smile. I still can't believe he's real.

The more I look at his pale skin and feel him near me, the more feral I become. I want to mount him like a wild beast and pump him full of my cum till it trails down his legs. I want to pin him down, hold him with my teeth on his shoulder while hearing him beg me to fuck him harder. I want

to ram my cock so deep inside him he'll feel me in his throat. But I don't want to hurt him. Ever. Not if pleasure isn't included in the package.

Anchoring my thigh on top of his, so that he can't move his leg and accidentally jerk his hurting foot, I push his sweats down. I bare his fair asscheeks and take hold of his hard cock, starting to jerk it using his precum to make the movement slick. My dick is stroking slowly between his cheeks and every time my head bumps against his pink hole, a shiver runs through both of us. His hand suddenly curls around my nape, fisting my hair.

"Raph," he breaths out, thrusting into my fist while working my length with his ass.

"Spit," I order him, lifting my hand to his mouth, temporarily releasing him. He obliges straight away, and I go back to beat him off, faster this time.

"Such a good boy." He moans hearing my words, and I twist my fist on the leaking head every time I pump upwards as a reward for his quick compliance.

His blunt nails sink into my inner wrist, deep. Deeper... drawing blood. The sting turns my arousal all the way on, blinding me with lust. I twist my forearm till it's wrapped around his neck and start furiously humping his back. I let out a wild growl before letting my teeth dig hard into his shoulder. His cock twitches in my hand, and his sexy cry just pours more fuel on my insanity.

So fucking good.

"More!" he chokes out, scratching his nails on my shoulder, neck, back whatever part he can reach.

I sink my teeth in, bruising deep, and that's when I hear Micheal loudly cry and feel wet spurts of cum fall on my hand.

My balls draw tight and then I'm orgasming too, grunting and enjoying the sight of my jizz covering Micheal's back and perfect ass. The feel of his hot tongue licking the blood from my wrist makes me groan, and more cum shoots out of my aching cock. "Fuck!"

Michael freezes, his body stiffening next to mine. My forearm goes back around his neck. Whatever he's thinking doesn't fucking matter, because we're doing this again, and more. So much more as soon as he gets better.

I let go of his softening cock and bring my hand to my mouth, making sure to loudly suck on my cum-covered fingers. He shudders, letting out an eager noise I want to hear every time we fuck.

"I'm sorry." He sounds somehow ashamed. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I got lost in it. I just..."

"You're sorry you made me come harder than ever?"

"What?" He turns to face me, and although I miss his sweet butt cradling my cock, his big blue eyes give me equal pleasure.

"Use those little nails all over me," I growl. "And the licking part?" I push my half-hard shaft against his side as proof of how even the memory of it makes me feel. "So damn hot."

His body relaxes against mine, and his gaze is filled with awe—and still a hint of wariness. We don't know each other well, but he'll learn to trust me fully. His tongue comes out to stroke his lower lip and I can't resist. I pull his head closer and crush our mouths together. My tongue spears inside and the taste of my blood mixed with his unique one is intoxicating. His mouth on mine creates excitement and need. But there's something else. Something warm and genuine; something I want to hold tight and never let go.

Too soon? Not soon enough. Not for me. That's how my psychopathic mind works. I get captivated by something and can't stop till I have it, possessing it completely. With people? They're just a scratch I need to fuck out of my system. I get obsessed with donors sometimes and can't rest till I rid the world of them. But Michael... let's just say, it was a long fucking time coming.

His phone starts vibrating on top of the green nightstand and he releases my hair to grab it.

The lines forming on his forehead tell me is nothing good.

"Detective Diaz, is something wrong?" His voice is a bit hoarse.

I get closer to hear the other person on the line. "Dr. Caldwell, I'm sorry to call you on your private phone. A nurse at the hospital told me you took a few days off. But we found another body. It's the same MO as the others, and if you could come to give it a look..."

"He can't..." I try to speak near the phone, but Michael pushes my face away and turns his head further left, putting more distance between us.

"Is the body already at the morgue?" he quickly asks.

"On its way," the detective replies.

"I can be there in thirty minutes."

"No," I quip.

"Yes!" he retorts, not at all intimidated by my severe stare. The one that has made bigger, more powerful people avert their eyes and shudder with uneasiness. No, he glares at me, and my dick is suddenly hard as a metal pole. Fuck, he's perfect.

"Is everything alright?" I hear the detective inquiring through the line.

"Certainly. I can finish the autopsy in two hours, three tops." Micheal's eyebrows bunch up, perhaps in confusion at my smirking expression.

“Great. I’ll contact you later. And doctor?”

Michael hums in response.

“Thank you. We really appreciate your work.”

“No need to thank me, Detective. It’s my job,” he swiftly says before hanging up. “What the hell was that?” He turns to me, crossing his arms on his chest. And I wish he wasn’t wearing that stupid shirt, because I want to know if the blonde hair sprinkling his pecs also covers his forearms.

I shrug. “You’re in no shape to go to work.”

“My foot is much better, and I can work from my chair. Plus, you weren’t so worried about my health a few minutes ago while you were battering me into the mattress.”

“If I wasn’t, you’d still be under me on your hands and knees, filled with cock and hitting your head on the headboard from how strong I was pumping inside you,” I growl, grabbing his throat in a possessive grip.

“And I will. As soon as you feel better.”

“I feel better,” he whispers, licking his lips eagerly and wiggling his sweet butt on the bed.

“Don’t tempt me, Michael.” His name is wrapped in a warning. “You’re not ready for what is coming, yet.” I slam my lips against his and give him a fast, dirty kiss. After biting on his juicy lower lip hard, I let him go. Love to see the imprint on the plump edge. And the dark mark I left on his shoulder almost makes me roar with satisfaction.

“Alright, but I’m going to work,” he lets out breathily. His cheeks are flushed, and lips swollen. My work is done, for now.

“No, you’re not.”

“Raph, I don’t know why you think you can dictate my life. But, newsflash, you can’t. I’m going because this serial killer needs to be stopped, and if

there's anything on the body that—”

“Serial killer?” Now, *that* is interesting.

“Look, I already said too much. I need to go.” He shifts to the edge of the mattress and, distracted by his irritation, puts some weight on his hurt foot, wincing. I round the bed and quickly lift him into my arms.

“I feel like Cinde-fucking-rella. Put me down.” He grunts, but it sounds muffled with his head against my neck. He fits perfectly against me.

“Not yet, piglet.”

He leans back just to show me his rolling eyes. And I have to hide a smile. He's not afraid of me in the least. People are usually uneasy around me. I guess that, on some level, they feel the predator underneath. Unless they're blinded by my superficial appearance, they behave cautiously.

With Michael, the reason is entirely different. That reminds me, I need to talk to Meg ASAP. She has a lot of explaining to do.

But right now, I need to take care of Michael. I walk to the bathroom and only there do I let him go.

“Wash. I need to make a call before we go to the morgue,” I tell him.

“We?” he asks, looking all cute and confused.

“Yes, we.”

“You can't come with me.”

“Why not?” His continuous resistance, instead of annoying me, amuses and beguiles me.

“It's a police matter, you can't come. And don't you have to work?”

Looking down at him, I state, “I'm the boss.” Because of his incredulous expression, I add, “If you waste more time, we're going to be late.”

He releases a long sigh and turns toward the sink, mumbling something under his breath. I kiss his head, grab a towel, and clean myself on the way

to the living room. I find my jeans on the sofa and pull them on, then grab my phone from the coffee table.

I hear the shower on, and although I'd prefer Michael to carry my scent all day, I don't want to spook him. I need to tread carefully. I know he can feel the weak bond between us, but he's also puzzled by it. I need to make it stronger before pushing all the way. Linda taught me everything about how to sabotage, trick, and manipulate, but she also showed me how to be patient, how to read other people—which was the most tedious and hardest task my mothers gave me—and wait for the right time.

Pulling out my phone, I see three missed calls from Rami and a bunch of texts in our “Fosters and Not Bros” group chat. I reluctantly open the chat and start reading last night's exchange.

Rami- *Yo, check for signs of the end of the world because the unthinkable happened!*

Gabe- *You finally shaved that Big Lebowski beard?*

Rague- *You accidentally burned all your gloves*

Uri- *Guys at the coffee shop finally got your name right*

Sari- *Any of our names right*

Gabe- *They get mine*

Uri- *How do you know? You always send your assistant to do lowly errands*

Rami- *They don't screw up my name anymore thanks to that famous actor, Rami something*

Uri- *Malek. Rami Malek. He was good in Bohemian Rhapsody*

Sari- *What's that?*

Gabe- *Sari, less work more fun*

Uri- *Look who's talking, the Devil's Advocate*

Rami- *All of you pause your chicken brains and thumbs for a second.*

Rague- *Chicken don't have thumbs*

Rami- *It's about Raph, for fuck's sake!*

Sari- *Is he in trouble?*

Gabe- *What did he do now?*

Uri- *A mystery needing to be solved*

Rami- *Inner eye rolling, Uri*

Uri- *Is the eye rolling a hint?*

Rami- *Apple should make a flip off emoji*

Rague- *Tell Raph I have two gallons of acid with whoever-shitty-fucker's name on it in my car*

Why did they all assume I screwed up? I can be impulsive, risky, and show little concern for the consequences of my actions, but they are not that much better.

Rami- *All wrong. Wait for it, drum roll please... he has a boy toy!!!*

Gabe- *Don't care. Rague, why do you have so much acid in your car? What if the police stop you?*

Rague- *I have a construction and demolition company. And I'm an exemplary driver, no reason to be checked by the pigs. And acid is essential to me*

Rami- *Like water?*

Gabe- *I'm sorry I asked. I'm out*

Rami- *Gabe wait, you rusty hunk of metal!*

Sari- *There's more?*

Uri- *Spit it out I want to go back to sleep*

Rague- *Is the couch in the lab that comfortable?*

Uri- *Why, Rague? Do you want to try it out?*

Rague- *You should go back home*

Uri- *I want to hear about Raph's boy toy first*

Gabe- *Why is it every time you guys bother me it's always regarding frivolous stuff?*

Rague- *If that's true, Gabe, why do you keep answering us?*

Gabe- *To check you didn't do anything idiotic*

Uri- *Raaaaami! Head, couch, sleep.*

Rami- *The boy toy is Michael Caldwell, the guy Meg has been seeing at the diner.*

Rague- *What?*

Uri- *Plot twist!*

Gabe- *No mystery there then. You already told us who this Michael is. But Raph is a suspicious fucker. It has to be one of his schemes.*

Uri- *Right, he's getting close to the guy by pretending to like him to extrapolate information from him... that's what I'd do too.*

Sari- *Or maybe Raph likes him.*

Rami- *And Sari wins a giant teddy bear!*

The text exchange keeps going and going. I usually am part of the teasing and taunting, but I don't like when they do it with Michael.

Me- *He's not my boy toy. Stay out of it and fuck you all.*

I dial Rami's number and he picks up after two rings.

"Yo, still boinking the doc?"

"The fact that you use the word *boinking* is proof of your very sad sex life,"

I deadpan. "Do you know anything about a serial killer in Chicago?"

"Always nice to start the morning with such great conversation. But you need to be more precise."

"Michael is doing forensic work for a Detective Diaz on a case with multiple murders."

“‘Not Interesting’ my ass,” he mumbles. “And you want to know everything there is to know about it.”

“Yeah.”

“Serena and I will gather the information within the day. In the meantime, tell me how your boy toy likes to...”

“Knock it off! And stop calling him that,” I hiss, running a hand through my hair.

“Told you!” I hear Rami exclaim.

“What the fuck?” Rague’s gruff voice reaches my ears. “Are you with Meg’s Friday guy?”

“That sounds kinky.” Rami scoffs at him.

“His name is Michael.” If they don’t stop giving him stupid nicknames, I’ll break something. Preferably Michael’s ugly clothes. Tearing them into shreds is a good image.

“We took pictures of him and Meg at the diner, and after they left, you said you were going home,” Rague grumbles.

“I got thirsty.”

“Thirsty,” he repeats.

“We are not buying that,” Rami unhelpfully says. “By the way, Thank God I tamper with the video from the convenience store at the time of the attempted robbery, because the way you were all over Michael... Were you trying to put Alien inside him?”

I growl at Rami’s stupid taunt. I already get enough attention from the media because I’m part of a rich family, on top of being the face of a multimillion-dollar research lab. I don’t want more.

My appearances at clubs and high-profile events—as I supposedly like to party and hook up—don’t help. It’s all a façade. The socializing, not the

fucking part, since I do play around with one-nighters. It's not hard work to pretend to be "socially acceptable." Camouflaging can be such a fun game to play. Being able to get away with a fake persona—deceiving everybody around me by mirroring their emotions—can also be enjoyable.

But the scanning of other people's feelings? That can turn exhausting for a psychopath with a small emotional range. Because they feel so much, and their responses to certain situations don't really make sense to me. That's why Uri is the one who befriends powerful people, enters their circles, becomes one of them; I just go along for the ride. Being all rich and a sociopath it's easier for him since he actually likes being around people.

But I have to follow him. It's expected of me, for my family's social class, and so I can create work connections. Plus, our side business might need a discreet helping hand in the future. As Rague always says, '*you never know.*' But I just found Michael, and I don't want him mixed up in all that. Not yet anyway.

"Fuck you," I swear at Rami.

"Are you this charming with your friends in high places as well?" he teases.

"Why did you lie to me and go solo? I could have helped you with... the doc," Rague mutters.

"I don't think Raph would accept your help with his..." I growl menacingly. "Michael. Geeze Louise, calm down." Rami sniffs.

"Why not? I'm good at making people talk." I hear Rague's knuckles cracking through the line. Yes, he is very good at extracting information from donors—with a knife and a hammer. But the only screams I want Michael to utter are the pleasurable ones I'll cause.

"Your Mata Hari methods will take too long. And I want to know if there's something more going on with Meg now. Let me work on him."

I snarl. “Stay away from him, Rague. Do you hear me?” My tone is filled with murderous threats.

“Fuck, you were right,” Rague whispers.

“Why do you sound so surprised, Hulky? I’m always right,” Rami counters.

“Seventy percent of the time,” Sari’s voice suddenly chips in. “Hey, Raph.”

“Hey, Sari.”

“The blood samples look promising this time.” Sari is working on lab-grown blood cells, which should perform better than a similar transfusion of standard donated red cells, at the same time eliminating the risk of contracting any disease from donated blood.

Although I have a business degree from Harvard, I do have a small knowledge of medicine; being the president of a medical research company means I need to have a broad knowledge base. And it also helps to learn how the human body works when I *take care* of the donors.

“Good. Keep me posted.”

“Also, I processed the DNA from the attempted robbery. Rami found no match in the police database, or any other database,” Sari efficiently tells me.

I grunt in thanks.

“Sorry, bro,” Rami says.

“What’s your angle? With Michael?” Rague asks me, annoyingly going back to our previous conversation.

“There’s no fucking angle.” Well, there will be when I bend him on this couch and rut into him until I stuff him full of my cum. Just the mental image makes me half-hard.

“So, when are we gonna meet him?” Rami doesn’t let go. But the truth is that I want to keep Michael all to myself. At least for now. I want to spend

time with him, alone. My family needs to butt the fuck out. Selfish? Definitely. And I don't care, as usual.

So I ignore Rami's question, and instead ask, "Serena, how long before I get my information?"

"Approximately five hours, Raph," she replies before I hang up.

Hearing a very noisy approach, I look up. Michael is hopping on one foot, looking freshly ready. He's wearing a horrible light blue, long sleeve polo shirt *tucked inside* a pair of grey pants and—dear God, brown loafers.

"Do you buy your clothes in bulk from a colorblind guy without a sense of style, or do you go to the thrift store on Seventh Avenue? The one with the nun clerk." I raise an eyebrow at him.

"Very funny. But not everybody has money to waste on *haute couture*, Mr. Valentino." He points at my jeans. His eyes take a long time studying my bare chest before they lift to my face again. I work hard on my body, and Michael's appreciative gaze makes all the sweaty hours worth it.

"I thought I was Mr. Hottie. And these are Galliano's." I wave at my jeans, smirking when his gaze stops on my groin. I stalk toward him. I put my hand on his hip, untucking his polo while my knuckles stroke his adorable, scrunched up nose. "I wear expensive clothes, it's true." Partly because my rich persona does, and also, "Because I like the feel of high-quality, soft fabric on me."

"Fashion slut," he mumbles, narrowing his affronted gaze on me. But his body tells me all I need to know the way it's leaning toward mine. Like a moth to a flame, I'm going to make him burn slowly and deliciously.

"Really?" I breathe into his ear, licking and nipping at the area on his neck that makes him whimper. My hand glides behind, fingers slipping inside his pants and gripping his bare, silky buttcheek. He tilts his head to the side to

give more space for my exploration. And when I bite his jaw, a sexy noise escapes his lips and his body arches into mine. So responsive.

“I could do whatever I want to you right at this moment, babe. And you’ll let me. You’ll beg for it,” I grunt, grinding my hard cock into his belly. His sinful moan almost makes me walk him back into his room and have my wicked, depraved way with him. He’s pliable in my arms, lost to his desire. For me. And fuck if that doesn’t send a bolt of pleasure straight to my balls.

“Who’s the slut now?” I smirk, licking his neck in a long slick path from base to chin. Michael’s arms tremble around my shoulders, and, when I lean back, he opens his half-lidded, lust-filled eyes.

“My slutty...” I whisper, enjoying the red blooming on his cheeks and the soft gasp leaving his mouth “...piglet.” That makes him snort, just like the animal would.

“You’re unbelievable.” He shakes his head and drops his arms. “And I can’t believe myself either. Letting you touch me while insulting me over and over.” He grumbles, hopping to the counter and shoving things inside a green bag.

“‘Piglet’ is an endearment, not an insult.” And I won’t fucking stop touching him.

“How about when you said my clothes are hideous?” He glares at me.

“I was just stating the obvious.” I point to the vomit-colored polypropylene bag he’s hiking on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll take you shopping after you’re done with the corpse.”

“That sounds very disturbing. And I don’t need a sugar daddy.” He grabs the house keys and hops to the front door.

“But I know how much you love when I say ‘attaboy.’” He freezes like prey sensing a predator. “Your pupils slightly dilate, and a hot as fuck shiver runs

across your whole body. Just like now.” I take two steps, grab his hair, and slant our mouths together.

The way he immediately responds to me sets me on fire, and all I want to do is show him how searing hot my touch can be. But there’s a serial killer on the loose, one that Michael is eager to stop. And it would be my pleasure to end him—I could use my untouched Xtreme 12-volt drill on him. The thought thrills me. So, I savor Michael’s lips for one more minute, and, with a hard nip, I let him go.

“Attaboy.” I kiss his mouth again, wanting to feel him shudder against my lips.

When I open the door, he’s still half-dazed. Soon, I’ll discover what his thoroughly-fucked-into-oblivion expression looks like.

Crouching down, I smirk before saying, “Hop on, piglet.”

His grunt almost makes me laugh. All the boredom has been replaced by a blonde, sassy, tall glass of water. And when I feel his chest laying on my back, and his legs and arms curling around me, I promise myself I’ll never let him go.



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Chapter 6

RAPHAEL

After a quick stop for coffees and croissants, the cab left us at the hospital. We walk inside with my arm around Michael's back, since he was horrified by my bridal-style hold suggestion. Nurses and doctors greet Michael. Some ask about his foot, sending curious glances my way. Others leer at me, and although I'm used to it, the sudden stiffness in Michael's body lets me know he isn't happy about it. It pleases me. But he'll soon realize there's no risk at all of me going astray.

We take the elevator to the basement and follow the signs to the pathology department. We stop in front of a door marked with the number eight on it. As soon as we enter the morgue, I feel strangely at ease. The temperature in the room is cool. There's a strong smell of disinfectant mixed with some kind of cleaner in the air. Everything is immaculate and sterilized—the big rectangular metal tables, the round dental-like floor lamp, and the grey square floor tiles.

Nine small metal doors on the right wall are closed, but Michael told me there's three corpses on the *trays* behind them. He untangles himself from me to put his white lab coat on. And fuck, I never had a doctor kink, but I surely do now. With his blond hair mussed by the morning breeze, flushed cheeks, and clear blue eyes, he's like a special treat I want to devour.

He hops toward his desk and sits on the black stool near it, turning on the computer and then grabbing the light-yellow file laying there. There's a green post-it with Michael's surname stuck on it. He looks grim, whatever is in that file is making him feel uneasy.

"No assistant?" I ask him.

"There's no need," he replies without taking his eyes off the file. "This is a hospital morgue. The cause of death is usually obvious, and I don't need to perform an autopsy on every body that comes through those doors."

So, he's not used to having people in his *lair*. I'm glad he doesn't look bugged by my wandering, because he needs to get used to it. I'll be doing more of it, all over his life.

I need my space as well in the FUNS room. But I make an exception for my foster brothers at times. And I will for Michael, if he'd ever like to join me. The thought makes me shiver with pleasure. A small voice in the back of my brain is quite sure he'd at least want to try. That voice is not my conscience, since I don't have one.

"The body should be in the first chamber on the right." He points to one of the metal doors on the wall. He starts rolling his chair toward it, but I get there first and pull the handle down. A white bag containing the body lays on the long tray, which I slide all the way out.

Michael hands me a pair of gloves. While I put them on, his hand hangs hesitantly over the bag's zipper. "Are you sure you want to stay?"

“I have questions,” I simply state, adjusting the latex around my fingers.

“About?” He frowns warily at me.

I stick my hand in the chamber, feeling the coldness quickly engulf my skin.

“What’s the temperature in there?”

He seems positively surprised by my curiosity. He has no idea how similar our jobs are—because for me, ending evil people is a necessary job. One that I enjoy. We both have close experiences with death. I procure it, while he studies it.

“Bodies are kept between thirty-six and thirty-nine degrees.”

“How long can you keep a body... fresh?”

His lips twitch with amusement. “Up to several weeks. But it doesn’t prevent decomposition, only reduces it significantly. It just continues at a slower rate than at room temperature.”

I nod. Maybe Rague should build a couple of chambers in the base. Or a huge freezer. Even though we obviously never keep the bodies—we have a few ways to get rid of them—it could still be useful to scare the shit out of the donors. Waking up in a small, cold, unfamiliar space is frightening, right?

“Would you feel scared if you found yourself locked in one of those chambers?”

He stares at me with wide eyes. “Hell yes!” he vehemently exclaims.

So, I was right. Good. I like to spice things up with the donors and find new ways to satisfy my psychotic mind.

“Claustrophobic?” I ask him.

“No, but I’d pee myself if somebody locked me inside a very constricted, dark space. Wouldn’t you?”

“No pee. But I’d need some background about how I ended up in there to be able to tell you how I’d feel,” I reply truthfully, studying his reaction.

“Very rational.” He nods, looking intently at me.

“Always,” I confess. Since I feel emotions in a different, more subdued way, my rational side is stronger. Especially in stressful situations. But seeing a gun pointed at Michael yesterday almost made me explode with feral rage. Containing it hasn’t been that simple. I’m not really used to sudden strong feelings. I have to find a way to control them, since I have no intention of letting Michael go.

“What’s the hardest task while doing an autopsy?”

He answers after a few seconds of pondering. “With this kind? I guess the most difficult assessment is estimating the time of death.”

“Really?” My curiosity is piqued. When I find a potential donor, I usually ask Rami to gather information. I need to be sure that the person is a real monster who needs to pay for his vile crimes. Because I never hurt *decent* people—nobody is *innocent* in this sinful world, except kids and pets.

So, apart from quick background snooping, my point of view is always from a killer’s angle. I play with the donor—or should I say “punish” them—and then get rid of the body, eliminating the evidence that could incriminate me. Instead, Michael’s job is to find those traces I leave behind to get to me. Seeing things from Michael’s perspective is indeed fascinating. Could also help me with getting more thorough at the destroy-the-evidence part.

“It’s a false notion, mostly encouraged by TV series, that forensic science can accurately determine the time of death. It’s heavily dependent on a myriad of variables. The best a coroner can do is to make an educated guess.”

“Variables... like ambient temperature?” I think back to a year ago, when Uri and I left a body for the animals to feed on in the broadleaf forest my family owns west of Chicago. Donors can turn very feisty when acknowledging their impending death; we wasted too much time and were in a hurry. There aren’t even bones left anymore, last we checked, but the hot temperature at the time must have had a big impact on the remains.

“Sure. Factors that can lead to gross error also include body temperature, body size—thin, obese, muscular, frail—clothes the victim was wearing, like a blanket or nothing at all. Also, subtleties such as the microclimate.” I can see how passionate Michael is about all this. So why is he a hospital forensic pathologist and not a police medical examiner?

“What do you mean with microclimate?”

“For example: a transient sunbeam enters the room and lingers on the body for two or more hours, but it’s gone when the body is discovered. That would speed up the decomposition four stages.”

“Four? I thought there were three.”

He counts them on his fingers. “Pallor mortis, where the skin pales due to blood pooling. Then agor...”

“...mortis from the Latin, ‘cold death.’ The body doesn’t produce heat and so the decedent temperature slowly approaches ambient temperature.” My explanation earns Michael’s warm smile.

“Third stage, rigor mortis. The muscles stiffen and contract. And lastly, livor mortis, the gravitational settling of blood, which is no longer being pumped through the body after death, causing a bluish-purple discoloration on the skin. The file said this body—” he points to the white bag on the table “—was moved after death, and we have proof of that because his left side has a bruise-like discoloration.”

“The blood pooled down, pushed by gravity during liver mortis. But how do you know the body was moved from that?”

“Because the victim was found on his back. Not on his side. Which means he was kept on his side for a while before being shifted into a supine position. It's the first time that's happened with the Rope Killer. He never moves the bodies.”

“Rope Killer?” That's a terrible name.

“That's what the police medical examiners call him.”

“And...?” My next question dies when I catch sight of Michael's sweet smile aimed at me. “What?”

“You really are interested in all this.” He sounds astonished.

“I said I was.” I'd never lie to him.

“Yes. You did.” He studies me for a few seconds, and, more than ever, I'd like to know what he's seeing in me. Can he perceive the darkness?

“Are you thinking about a change of carrier?” His kicked up eyebrow and the slight smirk on his lips tells me he's teasing me.

I purse my lips, feigning pondering. “You do have a way with words. Would you teach me while wearing this white coat and maybe add a pair of sexy glasses?” I whisper suggestively, leaning down toward him.

He hums so damn sexily. “Wait till you see the horrible scrubs, brown hair cap, and plastic mask.” He bites his lower lip, trying to stifle a smile, but failing grandly when bubbling laughter escapes his mouth.

His light blue eyes are wide and his whole face glows with mirth. He's mesmerizing. If I wasn't obsessed with him already, this would be the starting point. And fuck, I like the light, silly air surrounding us. I cup his cheek possessively, tilting his head up with my gloved thumb pressed

underneath his chin to lay a fast kiss on his still-smiling lips. I want to drink that smile and save it inside of me.

He suddenly gasps. "I can't believe I'm kissing you in the proximity of a dead body." His hands run through his hair, messing it up even more.

"Stranger things had and still can happen, babe." And I hope they will. With him.

"Really? Stranger than this?" Incredulity laces his voice. "Like what?"

I smirk. "I'll show you as soon as you're done, piglet."

He huffs, his breath sweet on my lips. I want them stretched around my cock, attempting to suck it deeper and deeper, working it inside his throat. My patience is running thin, while my cock is getting thick inside my jeans. I'm not used to waiting. When there's something I want, I take it.

He turns the stool toward the body and pulls down the zipper, pushing the bag on both sides of the corpse.

A blondish guy lays a few inches from me. Not my first corpse, and sure as fuck not my last. But usually, the donor's bodies are still warm and pink when we get rid of them. This one looks rigid, his skin greyish—apart from the bruise around his neck and running down his side. There's a lot of caked blood around his nose.

Michael's expression while looking at the man is sad. He's probably feeling... sympathetic? Compassionate? While all I sense staring at the corpse is a fat slice of nothing. I mean, I want to find the killer and gut him, but not because I'm driven by a sense of justice.

"Are you okay?" Michael suddenly asks me.

"Sure. Please, do your magic." His blue eyes take in my face, and, after a couple of seconds, he nods and pulls a small voice recorder out of his coat pocket.

“The victim is male,” Michael says into the recorder. He opens the yellow files and reads. “Jeffrey Carl Thomas. Thirty-two years old. Light brown hair, blue eyes.” Michael slides the corpse’s eyelid up to double check the color of the iris. “The blood-red eye, petechiae, and puffy lower lip suggest death by strangulation. And the burn left on the skin seems to match the one on the other victims.” He leans over the neck to get a better view, moving a magnifying glass over it.

“He used a wire rope,” I say, staring at the jagged bruise.

He slightly frowns at me. “Probably. The traces of steel found on the other four previous victims were the same, as the imprint on the skin. Which means the killer likes to use the same weapon.” Michael lifts the victim’s hands, one after the other. A couple of nails are caked with blood. “Signs of a fight on his fingers suggest the victim was conscious when strangled. He scratched his own neck in an attempt to loosen the rope and cracked his nails in the process.”

“So the killer was behind him pulling on the rope.”

“Yes,” Michael says. “I’ll gather some of the blood from under his fingernails. But if it’s like the others, there will only be traces of the victim’s DNA.”

“Did you check his hair?” I ask, staring at the corpse’s thick blonde waves.

“Why? Do you see something?” Michael moves closer to me, shifting the lamp until it illuminates the strands.

“If the killer was behind him, he had to pull the victim’s body against his. And since the victim’s hair is... luxurious, maybe some got inside the killer’s mouth? Saliva residuals could be found among the strands.”

Michael turns his gaze to mine, a mesmerized look on his beautiful face.

“That’s a very good point.” A male voice breaks the moment, and I turn toward the door to see a tall guy wearing a black hoodie over a checkered shirt, and a shorter one with jeans, a blue suit jacket, and tie. They both have police badges hanging around their necks. So, these must be the two detectives working on the Rope Killer case.

The shorter, brown-haired one introduces himself as Detective Diaz. While the tall blonde one is Polsner. His brown eyes are quick and calculating while focusing on Michael, and the smile on his face looks too bright to be genuine.

“You must be Raphael Bear-Stone?” Diaz’s question sounds more like a statement, so I just stare at him. “The commissioner gave you permission to observe, not assist.” He points at my gloved hands.

My family’s powerful connections are why I’m allowed to be here today. And the two detectives don’t look happy about it. Tough shit. Most police officers are a bunch of arrogant attack dogs with a gun and a hero complex. Looks like these two are part of the majority.

“I asked him to help. He has a medical background and I need some extra assistance today, since I’m injured.” Michael waves at his bandaged foot. “The dean of the hospital, Dr. Danford, gave us permission. I can call him right now, if you need to hear it directly from him?” he finishes, looking from one detective to the other.

I know Michael is bluffing big time. But the fact that he’s trying to protect me feels... good. So I grin, putting a feral touch on it when I aim it at the detectives.

After a few seconds Detective Diaz replies, “There’s no need for that.”

I see Micheal’s shoulders relax. “Good. So why are you here?”

“We came to check if you found something?” Polsner explains.

Diaz pulls his ringing phone from his jacket. “Need to take this,” he says before walking out of the room.

“I just started. I need at least a couple of hours,” Michael tells Polsner.

“But do you think it’s another victim of the... Rope Killer?” The detective grinds his teeth around the name.

“At first glance, it looks like the same murder weapon. A wire rope.”

“Still don’t know what kind?”

“If the metallic residue around this victim’s neck is the same as the others, I’m afraid so. The lab tech said they are too common.”

Polsner nods. “What else can you tell me?”

“Nothing you don’t already know. The victim’s eye and hair color checks out with the killer’s preferences, but not the age. This guy was much older than the others. But he did suffer from hemophilia.”

That’s new information.

Michael turns to me, clarifying, “The killer aims at people with a rare genetic disorder which stops blood from clotting.”

Although I already know what hemophilia is—and now understand why there’s so much caked blood around his nose—I like how he keeps me in the conversation. In opposition to the detective, who starts talking about more details without giving Michael the opportunity to keep me in the loop. And that’s when I notice that Polsner’s attention is laser focused on Michael. It’s too keen to mean nothing. Almost vulturine. I can see interest in his eyes. A hounding curiosity. It incites a tsunami of possessiveness to wash over me.

I pull a glove off and lift my bare hand to Michael’s nape, encircling it possessively and stroking my thumb on the side. Michael stops talking to look at me for a second, but then turns toward Polsner and resumes their

conversation, tripping adorably on a couple of words. His pulse is running under my fingers, and the redness on his cheeks is spreading by the minute. Whether it's caused by embarrassment or pleasure—or both—I can't tell. Doesn't really matter.

My proprietorial gesture is a quick way to make a point to the detective. Showing him Michael is taken. And I don't fucking share. I almost hope Polsner will try to challenge me. A zing of excitement rolls over me at the thought of what I could do to him. Ruin his life—since unfortunately I cannot kill him—for daring to think he could steal from me.

The detective's eyes fall on my hand and then lift to mine. My stare is empty, and I push a cold smirk on my lips.

“Michael's foot hurts, so if you could come back later and let us work...” I say, using an overly dry tone.

“Sorry about that. We appreciate you coming here anyway,” Polsner says, looking at Michael. My hand tightens slightly around his neck, but a crooked, wicked smile kicks up the side of my mouth at Polsner's defiance. One step, and I will destroy him.

Diaz strolls back, pushing pause on my annihilation plans. He tells his partner they need to go back to the precinct.

“We'll contact you later,” he says before they leave.

Michael turns to me, his eyebrows kicked up in question.

“What?”

“What's with the dominating hand around my neck?” He leans back to better display my fingers still curled on his smooth skin.

“Just clarifying the situation to the detective,” I slowly utter.

“What situation?” Michael sounds breathless.

I smirk smugly.

“I’m not a possession,” he tries to argue.

Silly piglet.

I capture his mouth in a punishing kiss, nipping, sucking, and biting his lips till they turn red and swollen. One of my favorite sights. “The faster you finish, the faster we can go home,” I whisper, letting him imagine what I’ll do to him when we get there. He sighs, but then shakes himself from the lusty haze and goes back to his job.

“Attaboy.”

“Knock it off!”

I’ve never smiled this much.



I’m once again in my family home garage. I sway my leg over my bike. Hooking my helmet on the handle, I unzip my leather jacket while passing the wall hiding the base entrance, and go through the door that lets me inside the wide front foyer of the house. My boots make a squeaky noise on the waxed white marble floor as I walk by the sitting room and then the parlor. The drawing room door is closed, as is the dining room. Ferdinand, the butler, must be in the kitchen chatting with the chef. I keep going, reaching the corridor and turning right. My feet move toward Meg’s office.

I left Michael at his place, sleeping. It took him three more hours to finish his meticulous autopsy on the body. He double checked everything and then contacted the detectives over the phone, since they were stuck at another crime scene. I kept stealing quick glances at him when I thought he wasn't paying attention. But each time he caught me, his expression softened before he went back to his task.

Unfortunately, there were no saliva residuals among the victim's strands. But Michael did such diligent work, and that's why he conked in the taxi on the way back after I forced him to take more painkillers. So I tucked him into bed and decided to go talk to my mother while he was out. Rami called me to update me just as I was about to leave the apartment.

The robber's fingerprints didn't belong to anybody in the police criminal database. And the gun he used was reported stolen a week ago by a Ms. Scalini, a sixty-four-year-old woman working as a maid for a cleaning company. Rami checked her bank accounts and any possible link to shady businesses, but on paper she looked clean. He'll keep digging. He also sent me the police files for the Rope Killer case, which I'll be checking later.

Before hanging up, I asked Rami to keep an eye on the cameras on the streets around Michael's building.

Leaving him was hard. Clingy isn't an adjective I ever thought somebody would throw my way. My foster brother did. And I don't give a fuck. I need to be sure Michael is safe. And being with him is the best way I can protect him. But Meg has a lot of explaining to do. I need answers.

I knock on the polished, dark oak door and wait. This is Meg's family home. A three-story mausoleum filled with priceless antiques—invaluable paintings, Persian rugs, and heirlooms fill every ample room. I was raised here with the others. Although, we spent a lot of time at the group home as

well. I never understood why Meg kept the place unchanged. She hated her parents. They got rich through shady deals and criminal connections. And she's been trying to atone for their sins all her life. Gabe thinks that's why she took care of us.

I'm not interested in her motivations. I'd be one of those serial killers the police are trying to catch if it wasn't for her and Linda, and the alternative path they showed me.

I can almost hear the echo of innumerable memories bouncing off the pure white walls and alabaster columns. They're silenced by Meg's voice inviting me through the door. I enter, walking purposefully until I reach one of those cream armchairs. She changed the fabric after Uri and Rague almost set one on fire when we were kids. But apart from that, everything looks the same.

"Raphael, what a nice surprise." She smiles sweetly. "What is it?" she asks, studying me closely.

Always like that with her; no bullshit. That's why I'm surprised by her crafty actions. And so fucking angry.

"I saw you at Marnie's," I tell her without preamble.

She takes a long breath. "How?"

"We followed you. Rami was worried."

"I see. Well, the coughing is nothing. It gets worse in spring with the pollen allergy." I can spot the evasive maneuver from a mile away.

"I'm not talking about the cough, although we will be telling Linda." Meg winces at that, confirming her wife's cluelessness regarding her health's latest assessment.

"Is there any change with your lupus that we need to know about?" I ask her, looking for any sign of deception on her face and body.

She shakes her head. "I've changed doctors. Everything is under control."
For now. I can hear the unspoken words loud and clear.

I nod, and then let the anger come out. "Why?" The word rumbles like thunder inside my chest.

"Raphael."

"Why didn't you tell me he was alive? Why did you keep him from me?" I growl menacingly. I'd never hurt my mother. Ever. But seeing the knowing look on her face, I feel the betrayal burning my insides like acid.

She gasps. "Raphael, I... had my reasons."

"The same reasons that pushed you to meet with him for the last three months without telling me?" My voice increases in volume the more I talk.

"I was going to tell you. All of you. I just needed time. With him."

"Why?"

"To check he was okay." Her lips slightly pucker.

I laugh bitterly. "Bull. Shit. Try again."

"I wanted to spend some time with him." She huffs. "And that's the truth."

That selfishness, I can understand. It's one of my best traits. But her treachery... that stings like a motherfucker.

"I want to know everything, Meg. Everything," I repeat, pronouncing every single syllable slowly. "From the fucking beginning. Starting with why he doesn't remember."

She sighs. "I'm sorry, Raphael." I grind my teeth, uncaring of her words.

"Your brothers need to know as well."

I nod. "He's mine, Meg. Mine." I repeat myself again to make sure my statement sinks in, my voice as cold as ice. "And nobody is going to take Micheal from me ever again."

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Chapter 7

MICHAEL

The stuffed pig's button shines under the bright light. It's crimson red. No, it's green, but something is smeared over it and the dirty fur. Blood.

My heart starts beating frantically as I hear the squeaking sound of a door opening. I'm paralyzed, squeezing the toy in one hand while the other... the other is curled around strong fingers. I'm suddenly lost in a sea of green deep eyes, giving me the courage I need.

But I hear myself yelling when I see the metal rod coming down again and again. I'm in a cold corner, alone. No pig. Nobody holding my hand. The sound of an electric shock makes me shiver in terror. And then his angry scream hits me and I jump...

I wake up, almost leaping into a sitting position on my bed. I have to use my hands to regain balance before falling off the edge. It takes a couple of seconds to realize I'm in my bedroom. It's dark outside, but the bathroom door is ajar, and the light is on, allowing me to see a body next to me. I let

out a shriek, still foggy with sleep and unsettled by the nightmare. Raph springs up and off the bed, naked as the day he was born, holding a knife in his right hand and shifting his head around to seemingly looking for danger.

“Raph?” My mind clears and then gets into the gutter quickly. My eyes can't stop ogling his perfect muscular body. Those dark nipples, the delineated lines of his abs and happy trail pointing to a soft but still big cock hanging between his strong, hairy legs, swinging erotically with every movement he makes. His balls are heavy and full, and damn those sturdy thighs are calling my drooling tongue. My gaze lifts to his hand and the weapon he's gripping. Where the hell did he get a knife from?

After making sure there's no peril hidden in the shadows, Raph relaxes.

“Shit. Why the hell did you scream?”

“I woke up with a body next to me when I'm pretty sure I went to bed alone.” I think the reason for my panic is obvious.

“I know. I tucked you in before going out.” He moves to the nightstand and sets the knife down. “And get used to having me in your bed.”

I stare at him, mouth gaping. “How did you get in, and why do you have a knife ready when you sleep?”

“Protection. And I took your extra key from the bowl in the entrance,” he replies oh-so-casually.

“You took my extra key? Without asking me?” My voice sounds high pitched. Even though part of my brain isn't surprised by Raph's freaky behavior. He's been unreal since I met him.

He just shrugs. *Shrugs.*

“That's not customary or acceptable behavior,” I accuse him.

“My brain doesn't really think in terms of societal guides.” Again, this nonsensical excuse.

I sniff, crossing my arms over my chest. “I gathered that from your brazenness and lack of understanding personal space.”

“Only with you, piglet.” My irritation decreases slightly, even though I hate that nickname. It’s a lie. I don’t anymore. After only one day I just... detest it.

“Aren’t I the lucky one?” My words are dripping with sarcasm.

“No, I am. But I’ll make it up to you, I promise.” How can such an arrogant, infuriating person turn sweet and so damn confusing in a matter of seconds?

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I’m barely able to say the words before Raph is on me, kissing me wildly. My flaccid cock turns to steel in two seconds flat, making me feel dizzy as all the blood rushes down to it. It’s like Raph is the pied piper of my dick, hypnotizing it with his sexy grunts and turning it into his stiff, eager slave.

He pins me down on the mattress, slotting his hips between my legs. An expanse of warm skin blankets me. His hands run up my torso, pulling my shirt up while stroking every part of me. I wrap my arms around his neck, letting the fabric bunch under my chin. But Raph doesn’t seem bothered by it. His nose nuzzles the blond hair covering my pecs and he moans, stroking his cheeks on the rough area. His mouth turns on my nipple, sucking, nipping, lapping at the sting. My body arches toward the ceiling, mouth open in a silent cry.

“As soon as you get better, I’ll cover you in my cum. Every fucking inch of you.” He growls, moving to the other nipple. His mouth is relentless, leaving small bruises all over my torso and making me shiver with desire.

“More,” I choke out, whimpering when the cool air hits the wet path his tongue is leaving on my skin. I love when he describes all the dirty ways

he'll fuck me.

"Every hole full of my seed. Busting with it. Dripping all over your body. Just so everybody will know not to touch you."

"Oh god." He bites my hip hard, surely leaving the sign of his teeth. I scream in delight, my cock leaking with heavy drops of precum.

His mouth suddenly envelopes my length, taking me all the way down his throat, and I moan like a bitch in fucking heat. He starts sucking me hard, bobbing his head fast while his nails scratch my sides, making me burn. I look down and find his lust-filled eyes zeroed in on me. I can't look away, even though I feel vulnerable under his deep gaze. But at the same time, I want him to see me. I want to give him all of me, to let go and fall into Raph's strong arms.

My hand runs through his soft hair, and I grip a handful loosely, knowing very well he's the one in charge but needing to feel him closer. His wicked tongue is massaging the underside of my dick every time he takes me back in. And his mouth... his warm, wet, sucking mouth is my cock's favorite place in the world.

When my hips start to thrust up, he lets go and climbs back up until we're face to face. He spits on his hand and then wraps his large palm around both of us, starting a wild rough tempo. I cry and he takes advantage of my parted lips, slipping his tongue inside, letting me taste myself in his mouth. Then he grips my lower lip between his teeth and growls like an animal, thrusting his hips against mine in a frantic rhythm.

When my lip slips from his teeth I shamelessly beg him, unable to stop myself. "Bite me again. Please." And I tilt my head, offering my shoulder to him.

As soon as I feel the pain radiating from the base of my neck, I come like a freight train, splashing on my belly and all over his hand. He starts pounding me on the mattress, his teeth and heavy body holding me in place, forcing me to take it. And I do. Only, I wish he was inside me.

He suddenly leans his head back and I kiss him with a desperate moan, biting his lip hard. His thick blood falls on my tongue and I suck, eager for more. He suddenly pushes back on his knees, points his cock at my chest and shoots rope after rope all over me, roaring his pleasure. I lick some of it off my lips, deeply enjoying the taste of his cum mixed with his blood. My mind is too drunk on pleasure to be horrified by my actions.

His big hand spreads our mixed cum on my cock, chest, and neck. His eyes half-closed, a low, satisfied hum leaves his lips. He looks blissed out. Or maybe I'm projecting because I'm on cloud-afterglow-nine, never to descend to earth again.

But fuck, I still can't believe he's with me. With his status and looks, he could have whoever he wanted. Actors, supermodels... both at the same time. But instead, he's taking care of a weird forensic pathologist who can't even fuck properly at the moment. And I'm starting to feel things for him.

He rolls us gently, careful of my foot—which only slightly stings—and I find myself half on top of him. Our cum drying between us is not a pleasant feeling. But I actually kind of like it. I feel claimed, just like I did at the morgue in front of the detective, with his hand around my neck.

I lift my head, propping it on my elbow while my eyes take their time studying his beautiful face. His hand on my ass squeezes the cheek roughly, unsurprisingly making my dick twitch. With the other, he slowly—like he's taking his time to totally enjoy the moment—shifts a strand of my hair

away from my forehead. Almost reverently. He's such a paradox with all his incongruities and contradictions.

I'm falling deeper into his intense jade eyes when I feel a prickling sensation at the back of my mind. A weird impression that only happens when I'm missing something, and my brain is trying to puzzle all the pieces together.

Something on Raph's inner wrist catches my eye, and I grab his hand to look at it more clearly. It's a number. And although I have no tattoos on my skin, I have seen multiple ones on the bodies at the morgue. The one on Raph looks different. The skin is darker red, like it has been burned, not tattooed. And there are faded lines around the number that reminds me of a TV documentary I saw a while ago. Where horses were branded with a blazing hot metal pole with the letter W at the end—the initial of the owner's surname.

I've heard branding is popular among people as well, but it looks very painful to me. I look up at his face and notice how his expression has darkened.

"This is a brand, isn't it?" My voice is soft and comes out hesitantly.

His jaw ticks as he nods. And I know he didn't do this willingly to himself.

"What happened?" The words escape my lips before I can stop them. I want to know more about Raph, but I don't want to push him. "If you don't want to tell me, it's okay. I'm sorry. We don't know each other well..."

His eyes jump to mine, and there's so much depth inside them, I feel all the air in my lungs being sucked out.

"Something happened to me when I was a kid." His voice is flat and calm.

"What do you mean?"

"I was taken and experimented on. For years."

All the blood leaves my face, and my mind starts screaming no. No. *No!* His empty eyes search mine, but after a few seconds he keeps going.

“It was a secret military project. Two fucked-up scientists, using torture and other methods tried to turn me into a cold-blooded assassin, with no emotions whatsoever. Only thirsty for death and blood, but still following commands. They chose me because I was... different. An orphan who liked to blow shit up and gave a void response to any kind of interaction.” The blank expression on his face scares me. It feels like Raph has turned into someone else. Someone almost heartless. He’s gone stiff beside me, his eyes glazed and distant.

“They branded me with my project number.” He looks at the red burn on his wrist.

They marked him like an animal. I cringed when I saw the horse documentary, hating the outdated methods they still use. But now hearing the same was done to a kid? An overwhelming rush of anger boils through me. They tortured him, exposed him to unimaginable experiences so they could turn him into an unfeeling weapon. Now I understand his odd behavior.

A hole full of deep sorrow forms in my chest. I feel a tear running down my cheek. Raph stops its path with the pad of his thumb.

“It was a long time ago.” I’d believe him if it wasn’t for his eyes. I can see the shadows in them, even in the dim room. But I decide not to call him out on it. Instead, I lower my face until my lips brush against the number on his wrist. I place a butterfly kiss there.

I know it won’t change the events that led to the painful act, but it’s the only way I can try to express the chaos of emotions I’m feeling toward him now. Words are heavy, stuck inside my tightening throat, and I can’t utter a single

one. I feel his body going still under my lips before he wraps his arms around me, lifting me effortlessly to cradle me in his lap. I still get surprised by his nearly unnatural strength.

“I was found by two incredible women. We all were.”

“All?” I’m able to say.

He opens his palm and I see the long scar marking the skin. I felt the rough edges when he rubbed his hands on me, but I was too taken by my desire to remember it afterward.

“It wasn’t only me. There were other kids.”

“Oh god,” I breathe out, feeling dread crawl under my skin. I push closer to his chest, trying to give him some of my warmth. Right now, I can’t think of another way to comfort him. I want him to know that I’m here.

“This cut is a reminder of the promise we made to protect each other. No matter what.” He traces the long scar absentmindedly, giving me the impression that he’s done it many times before, and then keeps going, “My mothers took care of us. They started another experiment on the scientists’ failed experiment.”

“What the fuck?” I swear, feeling outraged for them. Didn't they go through enough?

He kisses me lightly on the lips. A small, teasing smile tilting them. “Calm down, feral piglet. It was understandable, after what we went through. They needed to be sure we were capable of living straight lives. They couldn’t just let us go into the world.”

That makes sense, but still, I don’t like the idea of Raph being the subject of another experiment.

“They kept us in a group home in the beginning, to give us time to get used to a different way of living. They adopted only me and Sari, since we were

the only ones with no parents, and fostered the others. At some point, I guess we just became a family group. It worked. We work.” He shrugs, as if what he just told me isn’t that momentous. When in reality, it fucking is. And the fact that he trusts me with it... it’s blowing my mind.

“You’re a public figure. How did the press never find out about it?” I ask, stroking his chest in slow circles.

“It was an unauthorized military experimental project on kids. The government buried everything. And as soon as Rami got good at what he does, he erased everything.”

I run my fingers through the longer hair on top of his head, loving the way his eyes close in delight. The usually styled locks are currently flipping over every which way. He looks disheveled, and so damn sexy. I kiss him passionately, trying to express again without words all the wonder and reverence he generates inside me for still turning into a wonderful person after what he endured.

But I know it’s not enough. Not for me. I push back, catch his face between my hands, and, looking straight into his eyes, I say, “You’re fucking amazing, you know that?” Not Shakespeare, but I still make my point.

His gaze stays on me for a while, a glint of emotion making his eyes sparkle. Shadows, pushed away by the light. And then he slants his lips on mine. Desire explodes between us again and I let it flood me. I let Raph surround me.



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Chapter 8

MICHAEL

“Did people really wear those flared pants and padded shoulder jackets?”
The disbelief in Raph’s voice is laughable even though the actors on TV look quite ridiculous with their outdated style.

“The series was shot at the beginning of the eighties,” I deadpan, coming out of the kitchen with a bowl of popcorn. I take a seat on the couch and Raph’s arm automatically comes down on my shoulder, his strong thigh pushing against mine as he tosses some popcorn in his mouth.

We’ve been watching “Murder, She Wrote” for a couple of hours, and although Raph said that the show wasn’t as bad as he originally thought, he keeps criticizing it.

What’s with the old lady’s baby-worm-tiny purses?

How many nephews and nieces does she have?

She’s a jinx. Everywhere she goes somebody dies.

The cops always arrest the wrong person.

I'd never taken him for the chatty type, especially when watching TV. And although I find it a little annoying, I'm so into him that I secretly smile behind a handful of popcorn while dramatically rolling my eyes his way.

I rest my legs on his lap and place my head on his arm, enjoying the intimate familiarity between us. Three days have passed since he barged into my life, and he hasn't left me alone once—unless I count the time he blew my phone up with texts while he went to his place to get some clean clothes and came back with some extra for me as well. He really hates my *vomit-inducing* fashion style. He earned a twisted nipple for that offense which inexplicably turned into frotting.

We've been staying in my apartment ordering food, since neither of us can cook, watching TV and fooling around. I usually prefer to go outside at least once a day. When I have nothing to do, closed spaces feel kind of suffocating after a while and I need to move around, to feel fresh air on my face. But with Raph the trapped sensation is less pressing somehow.

My foot is practically healed and tonight I'll finally feel his insanely perfect cock inside of me. One way or another. His protective strike has to stop. It's *over-exaggerated*. He's been treating me like a sick patient, carrying me around the apartment like a damn baby monkey. I threatened to shave my pecs to end his absurd overbearing attitude.

Yep, Raph loves my hairy chest. He likes to fall asleep on it every night. Cheek nuzzling, nose sinking, his whole body curling around mine. Almost like he's trying to become part of me; to make sure it'd be impossible for me to disappear on him.

I still can't believe how naturally and easily he's infiltrated my life, and apartment. He's *eccentric*, reacts in a completely different way from what I expect, overwhelming and a bossy caveman at times. Out of the blue, he

turns restless and quite annoying. The only way to calm him down is to distract him with my body—which is not such a hard task. Crazy, I’m utterly captivated by him, and I figure I’m not that easy either. Still, we fit somehow.

After what Raph revealed about his past, I feel even closer to him. I don’t mind his nearness. I need it. The codependency between us isn’t healthy, but it’s the first time I’m letting myself be, without overthinking everything. But I can’t completely turn off my brain, nor the anxiousness I feel. I’m afraid of what will happen when I’ll have to go back to work in a couple of days. How this *thing* between us will evolve... or end. The thought sits in my gut like a two-hundred-pound load.

My eyes fall on his phone. Raph is always receiving texts and calls from his assistant, and brother, and foster brothers. Don’t know why he feels the need to emphasize the difference among the brothers. But they don’t seem annoyed by it. I’ve briefly said hello to Rague one time and bantered with Rami twice before Raph left to talk to him into my bedroom.

I wasn’t hurt by his need for privacy, but I always wonder what it’d be like to be part of a tight family. I envy the close-knit relationship they have. My parents were past mature when they got me. They did their best in raising me, but I never felt like I belonged with them or their view of life.

My hands move automatically to squeeze my forearms. I always sensed something was missing. The thought still stirs a dose of guilt inside me. They adopted me, probably saving me from horrible foster families. It doesn’t matter that I never felt like I fit in with them. They gave me safety and the possibility of a future. I should be grateful.

“The first victim of the Rope Killer was a young guy, right?” Raph suddenly asks without taking his eyes off the screen.

“Yes.” I search inside my memories before saying, “Douglas Palmer, a seventeen-year-old runaway.” Can’t ever forget that name, or the brutal way his life was taken from him.

“He was found in a dark alley in Washington Park by the owner of the pub across the street,” Raph adds, tapping his fingers on his knee.

“How do you know that?” I ask him.

“Rami did a bit of research,” he causally explains. “Was there something amiss compared to the following victims? Something the killer did differently.”

I open my mouth, but then close it again needing a few seconds to think. Looking up at the ceiling, I try to remember. “Well, the way he strangled Douglas Palmer was very aggressive and rough. The signs on the victim’s neck were deep. He pulled the rope with more force compared to the others. Like...”

“Like he got lost in it.”

I nod, swallowing the sudden uneasiness in my throat. “The second and the third victims were found in different areas of Englewood. One was a small drug dealer, don’t remember his name. His corpse was in his apartment.”

“No sign of forced entry. He must have let the killer inside.”

I didn’t know that, since that’s detective work not the coroner’s.

“The third vic, Carl Van...Vankar, he worked in a supermarket.”

“He got out of Juvie three weeks before being killed,” Raph tells me.

“His body was left near a dumpster behind his place of work. Nobody saw anything.”

“Police aren’t really trusted in those kinds of neighborhoods,” he says drily. Impoverished communities don’t have the best protection, I imagine.

“Paul Philman was the fourth victim. In his late twenties, found in Washington Park, like the first victim.”

“Unemployed. He was a drug addict.”

“His corpse was in an abandon warehouse.” I spent a lot of time going through those files, trying to find something I overlooked.

“Those four victims had no close family. They were rejects, outsiders, living on the fringe of society,” Raph utters.

“But the last victim,” I remind him, making him turn his green eyes on me.

“He was a therapist. His body was found in his office. His mother is still alive, and he was over thirty, even though he looked much younger. He suffered from hemophilia and was strangled just like the others.”

“They must have something in common.” He huffs with annoyance. I get it; I feel the same. “The hemophilia detail bugs me.”

“I know it’s weird. But it must make sense in the killer’s head.” I sigh.

“The question is how?” Raph let his head fall on the back of the couch. “Do you like the clothes I bought you?”

The sudden change of topic doesn’t surprise me anymore. I’m starting to get used to his odd idiosyncrasies.

I look down at the tight grey cotton shirt and worn blue jeans I’m wearing, and although I like my clothes, the ones he gave me are very comfortable.

“Yes.” I say, stroking a hand down the soft long sleeve. “But you don’t need to buy me clothes.”

“I really think I do, babe. And you know what else?” he asks, and there’s something in his casual voice that makes my eyes narrow. “I’ll make a pile with your old ones and burn them to ashes.”

I glare, shift my head and give his meaty bicep a hard bite in retaliation. He’s turned me into a fucking wild thing—scratching him and sinking my

teeth into his flash, especially when we're messing around.

Instead of jerking away, Raph curls his arm around my neck, pulling me impossibly closer to him and whispering in my ear. "Is this seduction, babe? Because after your ugly garments bonfire, I'm up to taste that tight, pink hole you hide between your cock-sucking ass cheeks."

Holy Mother of God. Unpredictable fucker. And because of Raph's loathing toward my briefs, my dick has a larger space to grow to full size, pushing painfully against the jeans' zipper.

"Rimming... yes please. Bonfire... fuck no!" I scream the last word out when he sucks hard on my neck, surely leaving a mark. The feel of his stubble scraping my skin makes me shiver from my roots to my curling toes. I shift my legs till I'm straddling him, starting to rub my cock against the bulge in his pants. He pulls my head down. Our lips are almost touching when, damn-it-to-hell, my phone starts ringing.

"Leave it," Raph growls when I freeze on top of him.

"It's the hospital ringtone. I have to answer," I almost cry with displeasure. Arching my back, I show off my body's stretching abilities while grabbing the phone from the coffee table behind. Raph pushes his hips upward after grabbing my ass roughly, making my balls draw and precum drip from the head of my dick.

Not fair, I mouth at him before connecting the call.

"Dr. Caldwell?"

"Hi, Mary," I'm barely able to say to the nurse, since Raph is still rubbing his cock against mine while sucking more hickies on my collarbone. God, it feels so good having his hot mouth, large hands, and hard body all over me. It makes my limbs tremble with desire for more.

"I hope you feel better."

“Y-yes,” I breathe out, stifling a moan when Raph’s hand slide inside my jeans and a finger glides between my butt cheeks. His low, gravelly grunt makes me melt like butter on top of him.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” she keeps going. I almost drop my phone when I feel the pad of his finger caressing my back entrance.

I hum with too much verve in the phone, hurriedly clearing my throat and trying to regain some kind of mental decorum. But my body doesn’t seem to get the message, and my hand pushes Raph’s head closer to my jaw, while my hips thrust against his teasing finger. My palm slides between us on the smattering of hair sprinkled across his chest, which I know deliciously trails with a soft twist down to his navel before disappearing beneath his pants. My breath catches in my throat as I feel his toned chest and pronounced abs under my eager fingertips.

“Somebody broke into the morgue and...”

Through the heavy haze of lust, the nurse’s words register, and I turn rigid.

“Wait. Someone broke in?” I parrot her. Raph halts his assault on my senses and grabs my phone, pushing the speaker button.

“Yes. A security guard saw the door to the morgue ajar and found that the place was trashed.”

“Fuck me!”

“I wish,” I think I hear Raph mumbling.

I untangle myself from his body and sit next to him on the sofa. My dick slowly softens as a thousand thoughts fire inside my head.

“Sorry, Mary,” I apologize for my vulgarity. “Did they touch the bodies in the chambers? Take anything?”

“The bodies... seem fine. But we aren’t sure about the rest. That’s why the dean needs you to come here and check.”

“Of course.”

Raph stands up with his phone to his ear, and I only hear Rami’s name before he walks to the kitchen.

After exchanging a few more words with Mary, I hang up.

Raph is still on the phone, so I go to my room to put a pair of socks and sneakers on. When I walk back to the living room, I hear him telling Rami we’re leaving for the morgue before he’s done with the call.

“I got your keys,” he says, handing me a brown leather jacket I’ve never seen before. Must be another piece of clothing he bought me. Not wanting to waste any time arguing, I slide my arms in, and the enticing smell and perfect fit distract me from the current predicament for a moment.

He zips me up and sends a heated look at me—well, if that’s the price to pay to wear new clothes, count me in.

“Any idea who could have broken into your office?” he asks me while opening the front door and waiting for me to go through—only to cop a nice feel of my ass, the sexy Neanderthal.

“Nobody comes to mind. But I’ll keep thinking.” I throw him a glare when he stills near the stairs, half blocking me from descending with his bigger body. Crossing my arms in front of my chest, I keep staring at him, pushing one eyebrow upward. He smirks in response to my challenge and bows his head in a compliant way. Too surprised by his accommodating behavior, I don’t immediately realize his next actions—bending down and hauling me onto his shoulder.

“Fucking hell, Raph!” I choke out, gripping the waist of his jeans as he keeps jolting me going down the stairs. “From piglet to a sack of potatoes. Don’t know which one is more outrageous!”

“You’ll always be my piglet, piglet.”

I can hear the smile in his voice, and it irritates me greatly. So much that I slide a hand down his jeans and pinch his ass. He continues walking without missing a step. And spans me. Fucking *spans* me.

“Save the foreplay for later, babe. It’s too dangerous on the stairs.” Cheeky bastard. His hand is still on my ass, squeezing possessively.

“Hands off, you troglodyte! And put me the fuck down. I can walk by myself,” I scream, feeling my face turning hot for all the blood pooling down. A gasp makes me turn my head when we finally reach the entrance. Mrs. Howard’s mouth is wide open in shock, her perfectly manicured hand pushing on her chest. Of all the neighbors who could have witnessed my humiliation, the sweet octogenarian who thinks rimming is a game involving a spinning top had to be the one.

“Naughty boys need punishments.”

Oh my fucking God! Raph just hammers the final nail into my already shaky reputation and stresses his words with a noisy slap to my ass that booms in the silent entrance. Mrs. Howard’s mouth turns even more slack. Then her eyes fall to my hand, still inside Raph’s jeans, and her cheeks color. Holy hell, this has to be a nightmare.

“Have a good day, Mrs. Howard,” I quickly mutter before Raph takes us out of the building. But I’m still able to hear her reply.

“Not as good as yours, naughty boy.”

Kill me now.



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Chapter 9

MICHAEL

Raph finally, *finally* stops and puts me down in what looks like a garage. I have to grab on to his biceps for a second while the dizziness fades away. He runs a hand in my hair and leaves a peck on my lips before turning to a slick, black motorcycle.

“Do that again and I will castrate you!” I snarl.

“No, you won’t, piglet.”

“I know twelve different ways to cut your balls off.” Not true, maybe three, but that’s not the point.

His arms suddenly wrap around me, and he pulls me flush against him. “You love my balls too much. I know you want to nuzzle them, taste them, fill your mouth with their heavy weight and suck hard.” He pushes his groin against me, and the feel of his hard length makes my legs shake. “But your cutting knowledges turns me the fuck on, babe.” Raph bites my neck, making me whimper. But then, abruptly, he lets me go.

“We need to go. But later you’re all fucking mine, Michael.”

I'm already his. The sudden, frightening thought pops into my head, and I cannot deny it.

"Have you ever ridden a motorcycle?" he asks.

"A few times." A fling from college had a Triumph he was obsessed with, and he let me ride it with him sometimes.

He hands me a shiny, blue helmet and slips a black one over his head. Then he swings his leg over and sits, gesturing for me to follow suit. I settle in behind him much less gracefully. He grabs my hands from his shoulders and wraps my arms around his waist, pulling me tight against his back. The motorcycle roars to life. Raph squeezes down on the clutch, and we fly out of the parking garage. I never understood the excitement some people get about riding motorcycles. Until now.

While we're gliding down the streets, spearing the wind and darting among cars, my surroundings look like an abstract painting, and I feel... free. The vibration coming from the bike, a sexy purr under my butt, is making my cock twitch. But it's Raph's strong body—his solid, hard presence—that turns me on more than ever. I squeeze my arms more firmly around him and wish I wasn't wearing a helmet. Then I could place my chin on his shoulder and maybe sniff him while sucking on his earlobe. He's turned me into a wild nympho.

"You okay? Your foot?" His gruff voice suddenly resounds inside the helmet through the intercoms.

"I'm fine. I love this!" I almost scream. He chuckles and I fully enjoy the throaty sound since it's kind of rare for Raph to let go. Unless it's his raw desire for me.

"Go faster."

"Hold tight, babe."

We zoom along the streets, and I realize he's choosing the most deserted ones at this hour of the afternoon. I relish the thrill of the speed. Too soon, we stop in the hospital parking lot. I stumble on my feet and Raph swiftly pulls me against him before I fall ass backward.

"Easy there." He slides my helmet off and hooks it on the handle. His eyes go to my pouting lips.

"I wanted to keep going," I whine. "Didn't remember riding was this fun."

"Because it wasn't without me," he simply states. He can be such an arrogant prick. "I've never let anyone ride on the back of my bike, but I think I'd like doing anything with you, babe."

And *swoon*. He did it again. Going from patronizing to melting sweet in a whiplash second.

He grabs my hand and pulls me toward the hospital. Mary is at the front desk and quickly informs me that the police are already downstairs. But she's distracted, staring at my hair. Fuck, the helmet must have messed it up. I run a hand through it and then turn to Raph to ask him how it looks.

"You always look delicious to me."

Not what I meant, but fuck if my heart and ego don't do a somersault. Pretty sure Mary's does too, judging by her yearning sigh.

The ride in the elevator is quick, and when we get to the morgue, Detective Polsner is outside talking to Mr. Danford, the hospital dean.

"My colleague will run the fingerprints he recovers from the room in the database and see if he can get a match. In the meantime—Oh, Doctor," he says when he sees me. "Mr. Bear-Stone. Didn't expect to see you here again."

The look he exchanges with Raph is tense and awkward, just like last time. The posturing between the two is almost ridiculous.

“I go where Michael goes,” Raph says matter-of-factly, tightening his hold on my hand. I move slightly closer to him, hoping to defuse the situation.

“Why is a homicide detective working on a breaking and entering case?”

“I was in the neighborhood, and since the body of one of the Rope Killer’s victims used to be in this hospital morgue, I’m just trying to see if there’s any connection.”

I want to ask where Diaz is—I felt some tension between the two detectives last time and now I wonder if it was related to the case—when Raph retorts, “That’s a big stretch. Didn’t think the police were this meticulous.”

“We take our job too seriously, at times.”

Raph stares Polsner down, while fear starts crawling from the base of my spine. Was the Rope Killer really responsible for this mess? But why would he be in my morgue?

“And one can never be too careful with serial killers. Spencer is the lead detective on this case,” he says, pointing at the lanky, bold guy looking around the room.

Mr. Danford doesn’t seem to feel the sudden strain marking the air, because he just starts to kiss Raph’s ass. “Mr. Bear-Stone, it’s truly an honor to finally meet you. I must say, your experimental work is truly changing the medical field.”

Raph reluctantly turns his attention to the dean and his demeanor changes completely under my eyes. “Thank you for your kind words. I have great people working for me. May I venture the same sentiment toward your hospital? Michael showed me around, and I’m impressed by the efficiency of its operations.”

Ehhhh, I didn't.

Okay, who the hell is this polished, well-mannered guy, and what happened to the grunting, conceited Raph I know? I pull on my hand, not wanting to keep hearing this weird conversation. I'm eager to check on my things, dreading the idea that something was taken. But Raph doesn't let go and tugs me a bit too forcefully, until my front is against his side. I feel like a damn doll sometimes—not that I'd complain in bed.

"I'm very pleased to hear it. Here, my business card. We can talk over lunch about a few interesting ideas I have that could advance both the hospital and your company." Then the dean finally looks at me.

"Dr. Caldwell, keep up the good work." He glances at my proximity to Raph, and his words suddenly take a whole other meaning. "And please collaborate with the police. I want this matter to be resolved as soon as possible." He points at the morgue before leaving. Which is a chaotic nightmare.

The filing cabinet is open; papers are all over the floor and one of the tables is upside down; the computer is on, but the keyboard is missing. No, I see it on the floor on the other side of the room. *Really?*

The door to the small adjacent room is open, and I gasp, thinking about all my blood and tissue samples splattered and dripping all over the place. But it seems like everything is in order. Untouched.

When I take a step toward the morgue, Raph lets go of my hand and follows me. I check the bodies inside the chambers, but they're all accounted for.

Harry, an assistant in the pathology department, has been keeping me updated the last few days, but there has been only one death, and it was a cancer patient. No autopsy needed.

Detective Spencer introduces himself, while I start picking up stuff from the floor. "Looks like the perp was looking for something. Dr. Caldwell, if you

could take a quick look and let me know if anything has been misplaced or taken.”

Everything is fucking misplaced! I take a big breath, trying to calm myself down.

Raph is crouched in front of the heavy vault near my desk. “What’s inside?” he asks me.

“The deceased’s personal effects.” Which reminds me, I still haven’t had any luck finding Mr. Coleman’s next of kin. His things are probably still inside the vault. I’ll have to ask Harry. But then I remember that the office phone isn’t on my desk anymore.

“Do you have a key for the vault?” the detective asks me.

“Yes.” I pull it from my pocket and open the thick metal door. “Everything seems to be as I left it. But I need to double check my files to be totally sure.”

“Do that please and let me know.” Then Spencer turns to Polsner and they start talking... police jargon.

Raph closes the vault door and strokes a finger on the grey scratches around the key lock. “Were those here before?”

I frown. “No. The robber must have left them when he tried to open the vault. Looks like a tornado went through here. He must have been pretty pissed to throw most things on the floor.”

“But he didn’t touch that room,” Raph observes.

“My sample room.” I walk inside it and give a quick glance around.

“Nothing was moved.” I guess human samples are not interesting enough for the asshole who turned my office into a landfill.

“I’ve got all I need. I’ll keep in touch. Please call me if anything comes to mind.” The detective gives me his business card and goes to Polsner, who

waves goodbye as they both walk away. It's only me and Raph in the morgue now.

I'm still looking for the office phone when I hear Raph saying, "You can come now."

I turn to look at him when a big guy appears at the morgue threshold. He whistles at the mess surrounding us and then waves two fingers toward Raph. He's sporting a full reddish-brown beard, his huge chest muscles strain against his tight black t-shirt, and his thighs look like huge tree trunks. He's wearing grey, fingerless leather gloves.

"Rami?" I blurt Raph's brother's name out.

The smirk that appears on his lips is devious. "Doctor Michael, Michael, Mike," he says as he takes a few steps toward me. "Or should I call you *babe*?"

Raph rumbles at him.

His warmth pushes against my back while his arm wraps around my waist. Rami looks at his brother and a mischievous glint appears in his brown eyes. "He was fun before he met you. Now he's such a Lurch. Grunt this. Grunt that," he pouts, sticking his lower lip out. On a man of his extra-large size, it's quite funny, and disturbingly appealing.

"Are you implying that I turn him into the Addams Family's butler?" I glare at him. This guy pushes the meaning of the word "*annoying*" to a whole new level. Still, it surprises me how light and goofy he sounds after what happened to him when he was only a kid. I should be in awe of him, but...

"Not implying anything when I said it straight to your face." He scoffs.

"You broke him!"

"Listen, you... gym rat." He raises an unimpressed eyebrow at my menacing tone. "Raph is not broken. I like him just as he is."

“Shhh.” Raph’s breath hits my ear. “He’s just trying to rile you up, piglet.” He leaves a tender kiss on my head, and his warm hand slides on my belly under my shirt. His nearness feels soothing and exciting at the same time.

“Piglet?” Rami coughs into his hand.

Great! Is Raph trying to give his brother more ammo? I pinch his hand in retaliation.

“Rami, I don’t know why you insisted on coming here, but focus on the damn problem,” Raph scolds him.

“Sorry, I was just very curious to meet you.” He looks a bit sheepish, but not that much. “Anywho, let’s take care of this mess. You’re taking up a lot of my time lately, Mike.”

“Better than flipping Jeep tires,” I mumble, not getting what he’s saying.

“You’re funny.” He annoyingly chuckles and then flexes his huge biceps. They are as big as a baby’s head. “But it’s Caterpillar tires.”

I slowly roll my eyes at him.

“Stop flirting,” Raph growls, and I can feel the vibrating rumble against my spine.

“I wasn’t. Jesus. You see? No fun.” Rami waves his gloved hand at us, and his eyes move around the room again. “Back to the mess. Unfortunately, this room has no cameras, but the rest of the building’s showed a guy in a coat and ball cap come in through the east entrance and down here using the stairs.”

He turns his phone toward us to show the guy he described slipping past the reception desk when the nurse was distracted and jogging down the hospital stairs. Then strolling down the corridor with his head down.

“How did you...? You hacked into those cameras, didn’t you?” I pinch the bridge of my nose, knowing the answer to my question already.

“Not admitting anything.” He sniffs. “But I have to say that the security in this hospital, just like your building, is terrible.

My building? “Are you still checking on me?” The thought hits me like a freight train. I turn in Raph’s arms, my eyes demanding.

“No. I just want to be sure you’re safe.” Raph’s big hand cups my cheek.

“Just go with it. Please, babe.” His soft tone guts me and I yield to it.

“My brother saying *please*. I’m still contemplating the idea that he was swapped by aliens. Or maybe I’m in a temporary coma—and not the good kind.”

Is there a good kind? God, he’s ridiculous.

I force my attention back to the video. “He took the stairs to get to the basement; that was a smart move. Nobody ever uses them,” I offer, looking at him.

“That’s how he got in and out easily,” Raph voices.

“But how does he know that? Maybe he’s been here before. I’ll make Serena check old video feeds. Hopefully we’ll be able to find something since I couldn’t get a clear shot of his face.”

“Show me the video again,” I suddenly tell Rami, hoping I’m right, and at the same time not.

“His coat!” I point at the screen. The video is in black and white and grainy. But I’ve seen that long, one-size-too-big, worn-but-still-top-quality coat before.

“I’ll be damned,” Rami mutters. “He’s the same guy who attempted to rob the convenience store.”

Raph snarls. “He was a fucking amateur. Didn’t know what the hell he was doing.”

“Yes, he’s the Martin Short of thieves. I saw the video from the store.”
Rami snorts.

“How did you see it? The camera malfunctioned. Unless...” I’m finally putting the pieces together.

“I asked him to erase it.” Raph sighs.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want someone to leak the video to the press.”

Just like he wanted the police officers to leave his name out of the attempted robbery. He doesn’t want the media attention on him.

“This is far from a coincidence,” Rami intervenes. “That guy wants something from you. And he seems desperate, which makes him dangerous.”

“What could he possibly want from me? I’m not rich; have nothing of value.” My voice is full of disbelief, but the fear I felt before is crawling back up my spine.

“It must be something linked to your job. Look.” He points to the computer screen on my desk. “He left the file open containing this month’s deceased patients’ information.” Rami is right. “He also went through your filing cabinet. Maybe looking for more.”

Raph adds, “But he left that sample room pristine.”

“And tried to open the vault,” I chip in.

“At the convenience store he went for the cash first. He must need money,” I think out loud.

“Or he was just trying to divert the attention from what he truly wanted.” Rami’s suggestion isn’t crazy.

“So, you think I’m in danger.”

“Probably.” Rami just shrugs. Making no big deal of things when they are, in reality, fucking huge issues must be a family trait. “I’ll check those patients’ information and see if I can find something.”

“I won’t let you out of my sight until we get him.” The promise is clear in Raph’s piercing gaze.

But what happens afterwards? Will he leave me? Instead of focusing on the likely peril threatening my life, I’m worried about losing a four-day-long, insane relationship. I mean, we haven’t even fucked.

“Well, in the meantime Meg has demanded your presence for dinner,” Rami says.

“Meg?” I look at both of them in question.

“You didn’t tell him?” Rami throws at Raph, incredulity dripping from his voice.

I cast a confused look at Raph. His jaw is clenched, and he’s giving his brother a cold stare.

“Don’t give me that murderous gaze. You had four fucking days to tell him who your mother is.”

Mother? Meg. Can she be my Meg? Megan Bear. Six kids. Bear-Stone Labs. Raphael has five brothers. My brain is firing too many clues at the same time. “Megan Bear is your mother?” I gasp. How could I not make the connection? I’m such a lousy detective. “What the hell? Did you know I’m friends with her?” Raph opens his mouth, but I cut him off. “Of course you knew. Why didn’t you tell me? I don’t understand.”

“Because I was checking on her the night you met her at Marnie’s,” Raph says simply.

“I don’t... What?” My brain is doing the equivalent of catching flies at the moment.

“She didn’t tell us about going to Grand View to meet a new doctor.”

“Dr. Sallinger, the immune pathologist. She’s in good hands.” I feel the need to say it, even though this still doesn’t make sense.

“You know about her lupus?” Rami asks.

“She told me last time I saw her. But only because she had a coughing fit. I’m a nosy doctor,” I say, trying to defend her. Rami nods, but the worry lines between his eyebrows remain.

“I still don’t understand what her health has to do with me.” I turn to Raph again.

“How did you meet her?” Rami asks me.

I sigh, annoyed, but decide to go with it. “I met her in the cafeteria at the hospital. We both like cakes, and the hospital’s are terrible. She suggested Marnie’s. It became kind of a friendly ritual.”

“Every Friday. And that’s it?”

“What else could it be? I’m one-hundred percent gay!” I half-yell at Rami’s stupid question.

“Oh, I can see that.” Rami points at Raph, who promptly growls at him.

“If you don’t tell me what the hell is going on, I’m going to kick both of you out,” I bark, having enough of all this. My fucking uneventful life has turned into a roller coaster this past week. And I don’t know if I can take more.

Raph is suddenly in front of me, nostrils flaring. His hands fall on my shoulders, holding me.

“I followed you. The last time you saw Meg, I followed you inside the convenience store.”

Holy shit! “You were worried about your mother and wanted to know who I was,” I murmur, my mind filled with twisting thoughts and doubts. Did he

hit on me to get information? Did he pretend to like me? We always stayed in my apartment. Never went out. Well, I was injured, but I've never seen where he lives. Or met any of his friends. But Rami...

"Wrong!" he snaps, making my eyes focus on his grave expression again. "I knew who you were. Mine. From the first time I set my eyes on you." The honesty in his eyes is undeniable. And although hearing him openly claim me for the first time is making my body tingle all over, I'm still feeling wary about his omission.

"Fuck," I hear Rami whisper.

"Then why didn't you tell me?" I choke out. My jumbling emotions are too close to the surface; doubt still tries to sink its hooks in me.

"I'm selfish and thoughtless." His hands slide down to my hips, pulling me toward him. But as I push my palms on his chest to stop him, he grabs my hair and tilts my head back. I inhale sharply, but don't pull away. "Wanted to just be with you for a while. My family is a lot to take in," he growls.

"Hey!" Rami huffs.

Raph's nose strokes the side of my neck and I whimper. Why does his reasoning sound crazily valid and so damn hot? His obsession with me isn't healthy, but I fucking crave it. I want to be owned by him. To belong. And isn't that unhealthy as well? My body doesn't think so. My hands curl around his neck, and when I feel his teeth scraping my skin, I give him more access.

A throat clearing makes us both freeze. "Although live porn is on my bucket list, I'd prefer not to look at my bro's junk." Rami's disgusted tone makes me take a step back.

"Rami, go. And close the door behind you," Raph calmly says with his heated eyes firmly on me.

“No,” I hear myself saying. “I-I need to clear this mess.” And I feel too raw to fall into Raph’s arms again. I need to think, and his nearness always turns my brain into mush.

“And we need to be at Meg’s later. Dinner time,” Raph exclaims like one of those happy-looking hosts on TV.

“Do I really need to go?” I feel Raph’s green eyes on me, but I decide to concentrate on the papers still littering the floor.

“Yes, the family wants to meet you.” Rami smiles at me.

“Why?”

“You’re a special guest.” He unhelpfully tells me.

God, dealing with this family is exhausting. And I’ve only met three members.

I sigh. “Fine.”

For the next thirty minutes, we try to get everything back into place. Rami’s happy humming while he stays at my computer is the only sound in the room. Raph is giving me the space I need, and even though he’s just on the other side of the room, his unfaltering gaze following every move I make.

I hate it. He’s too far. He looks unfazed, but his eyes have darkened and there’s a coldness clinging to him.

Once we’re done, I leave the list of things that need to be replaced on my desk, and we walk toward the elevator. When we reach the parking lot, Raph grabs my hand and pulls me toward his bike without a word.

“Guess I’ll see you there!” Rami calls after us. I huff behind Raph.

We get to his bike and, before sliding the helmets on, Raph takes his time zipping up my jacket. He eyes me with those probing green orbs. In the sunlight, they have a sparkly sage hue.

I keep my mouth shut. He sits on the bike and holds his hand out to help me mount. As soon as I cling to his back, he tears out of the parking lot and down the black roads. It's a gorgeous, start-of-summer evening. When we leave behind the noises and chaos of the downtown area, I wish I could smell all of nature's different fragrances.

I can't fully enjoy the ride this time anyway. I'm still in shock at the fact that Meg is Raph's mother. I respect her even more now, knowing what she did for Raph and the others. I thought about texting her, but what would I say? 'Thanks for the invitation and by the way I'm shacking up with one of your *kids*.'

They are far from that. They are grown-ups—the ones I've met, anyways—so why the hell did she refer to them as kids?

The bubble Raph and I were living in has definitely popped. I still don't know what to think about Raph lying to me about Meg. Or the fact that he stalked me and pretended to just bump into me.

He acted crazily around me from the beginning, and I was such an idiot to give the reins to my horny body without questioning him more. I just felt this weird pull toward him, and I thought he sensed it too. I sigh, defeated. The hurt and anger have slightly decreased since he told me I was his. But the betrayal weighs on my chest.

I'm so fucking confused. And I hate the uneasiness between us.

The bike speeds through quiet winding streets for a while and then goes down a very long dirt road with beautiful white flowers flanking it on both sides. He stops in front of a high metal gate set into a thick, impenetrable-looking wall that surrounds the property. The black, round eyes of the bear statue sitting on top of it look ominous under the afternoon's last dusky rays.

“Take off your helmet,” Raph says through the intercom. He tucks his under his arm, a cool breeze ruffling his black hair as the silence surrounds us.

Just now, I notice the black panel on the wall. Raph leans toward it and lets a green light scan his face.

“Welcome home, Raph.”

I know that sultry voice.

“Serena,” Raph says in greeting.

“Please give me the name of the person next to you,” she adds. Oh, she means me. Wow, this place is like the headquarters of a spy agency with all the super advanced technological security systems. My apartment has a single bolt. I probably should add an alarm after what happened at the morgue.

“Say your name, babe.” Hearing the endearment relaxes me and irritates me.

“Michael Caldwell,” I slowly utter, feeling like an idiot.

“Serena, add him to the list of people with total clearance.”

“Sure. I need a face scan.”

“Lean close to the screen. Like that. She’s memorizing your features, so that you can come here even without me,” he explains. The fact that Raph wants me to be part of his life erases *some* of my doubts.

“Done. Welcome, Michael.”

“Thanks, Serena. I guess I’ll see you in a few minutes,” I tell her.

“I’m sorry. That won’t be possible since I’m an AI assistant, but you can ask Rami to show you the interactive processing algorithms I use to learn from data.”

“What? Really?” She has such a human voice, without any of those robotic inflections. “I guess Rami is more an Iron Man than a gym rat,” I mumble.

“Hmm. I like the nickname,” she says. “Gym rat.”

“Feel free to use it with Rami, Serena.” And I hope she’ll do it in front of me.

“Thank you, I will.”

I can see the half-smile on Raph’s face.

“She’s very cordial,” I utter without an ounce of regret.

“You’ll fit in just fine with the others.”

Does he mean his family? Meg’s family. I still can’t believe it. What are the odds?

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Chapter 10

MICHAEL

Raph's bike takes us down the driveway. And damn, the imposing three story white house with huge, rounded grey columns is a showstopper. It also has a large porch, with a round balcony on the second floor, and an elaborate door and windows with dark shutters. When we enter the garage, I'm almost sorry I can't keep studying the odd piece of architecture. There's a few cars inside the large, every-red-blooded-man's dream garage. I can't distinguish one from another, but they all look expensive.

Raph parks his bike next to a huge Jeep and kills the switch. The engine dies and I immediately miss the soft purr between my thighs. I slide down, stumbling just a little this time. Raph flips the kickstand down and settles back against the seat. He takes my helmet from my hands, hooking it on the handlebar before turning his body to face me.

"I can see you're upset."

"You lied to me."

"I never lied." He grabs my hand and interlaces our fingers.

“Omitting is as bad as lying.” My words are harsh, but my voice sounds weak.

“Not in my book. I needed the time to make you see.”

“See what?” I whisper. Why do I feel so fragile right now?

He pulls me forward until my hips slot between his open legs. “That you’re mine, Michael. And I’m never letting you go,” he slowly declares, his authoritative tone making me gasp.

How can he be so sure?

My lips are so close to his I can feel his warm puffs of breath deliciously hitting mine. But he doesn’t make a move. This time, he’s giving me the choice. But I can’t think clearly with him this close, and I hate to put distance between us. *I have no choice.*

I close my eyes, order my brain to take a hike, and then kiss him. He opens his lips straight away, letting me suck his tongue and taste him. The dirty sound of our mouths devouring one another and his sexy grunts turn me on like nothing before. I push my body more firmly against his and whimper at the feel of his large hands molding to my butt. My dick is hard and throbbing, and my hole keeps contracting, eager to be filled by Raph’s big cock. Which is currently pressing against my belly.

The loud sound of a car door closing infiltrates my foggy brain. And then a whistle makes me stop dead. I pull back and Raph snarls like a furious wild animal at something behind me.

“When I heard about you, I couldn’t believe it. But eyes don’t lie.”

I turn around and see a tall guy with smooth caramel skin, long dreads, and light hazel eyes filled with wariness and curiosity. He has a piercing on his eyebrow and two hoops on his lower lip, plus several earrings on his ears.

He's wearing a grey sweater and black jeans that wrap like a second skin to his lean body.

"Me?" I ask confused..

The guy smirks. "I'm Uri, one of the foster brothers." He glances at Raph, his tone teasing. But I'm too distracted by his amazing smile. He could be a model for how beautifully exotic he looks. Maybe he is.

"Michael," I introduce myself, feeling a bit embarrassed at being caught moaning like a slut.

"I know. You're quite *famous* around our family." The wariness is still in his gaze.

"Am I? You make it sound vexatious."

Raph stands up and lace his fingers through mine. "It isn't," he says calmly, but there's no missing the warning laced in his voice.

Uri only hums, staring at our intertwined hands. One brother can't stop taunting me, while the other clearly doesn't like me. There's three more to go, and I feel my fight-or-flight response already kicking in. I may be odd, but like hell will I run away with my tail between my legs. Nobody intimidates me. Fight it is.

My stomach suddenly growls. "Why do I smell chips and grilled meat in here?" I ask, looking at Raph.

"That would be me." Uri waves his fingers and, without another word, walks toward a wall covered in tools. Guess he's one of those red-blooded men.

Raph tugs on my hand until we reach the door on the left side that leads into a wide entrance. "Uri owns a few burger chains," he says, but I'm only half-hearing him, too distracted by the ostentatious luxury we just stepped into.

The lavish decor, immense square footage—we pass at least three large rooms full of uncomfortable-looking sofas and shiny and priceless furnishings—and extravagant taste in ornaments can't hide the coldness and pretentiousness of the place. Is this really Meg's house? I feel so very out of place. Raph grew up in a damn palace.

"I want a tour later," I'm whispering at him when we enter the dining room. A wall of floor-to-ceiling windows offers a beautiful view of the wild garden and luxuriant foliage of the forest at the back of the house. In front of the windows is a long table set with ceramic plates, silver cutlery, and crystal glasses—and there's two people sitting at it.

One is Meg. The other is a humongous man wearing a red flannel shirt with a bear logo on his pumped pec—it looks like it might tear at the seams around his huge biceps. And I thought Rami was big. This guy is almost twice his size. The hand stroking his short beard is covered in scars and a few bruises, a clear confirmation that not fucking with him is a very good idea. His black eyes are on me, but I don't see any trace of the caution Uri showed. Only a deep curiosity, if I were to hazard a guess.

I realize Meg has rounded the table only when I find her in front of me. She wraps me in a tight hug. It's the first time she's ever done that. We usually smile or pat each other shoulders; it kind of works. The feeling of her thin body next to mine soothes some of my anxiousness. Raph grips my hand once again as soon as Meg releases me and takes a step closer. It looks like a protective stance, but why would he do it? And why does he look so tense?

Meg is not surprised by our nearness. Seems like she knows about us.

"Michael, I'm so glad you came. I hope you like roast beef. Sofia, our chef, makes the best one." Do Meg's eyes look a bit glassy?

“I do. Thank you.” We both sound so stilted.

“Oh, that’s...”

“Rague,” the big guy says.

“One of my kids,” Meg continues.

‘*Kids*,’ I almost snort, especially seeing the size of Rague. I wave his way and he gives me a macho head nod.

“Raphael,” Meg greets him... awkwardly.

He says nothing. Just stares at her, then squeezes my hand and pulls me toward one of the chairs. He takes off my jacket and places it on the back of the chair. Then he waits for me to sit before doing the same next to me. When I lift my eyes, both Meg and Rague look taken aback by his actions.

Before I can focus on that, a stunningly androgynous guy suddenly enters the room. He has long, shiny black hair that touches his shoulders, and a pair of glasses balanced on the tip of his upturned nose. Delicate features form his exquisite face. His skin is almost as light as mine. He flushes when his gaze finds mine, and a timid smile appears on his lips.

“Hi. I’m Sari.” He takes a step in my direction, but Uri appears behind him and grabs his arm, pulling him on the other side of the table to sit next to Rague. Am I that menacing?

I place the linen cloth napkin on my knees. “I’m Michael. It’s a real pleasure, Sari. I follow your work.” I can’t believe medical researcher Sari Bear-Stone is sitting opposite me.

“You do?” His pale blue eyes turn as big as saucers. He can’t be surprised by my groupie-ness. He’s a genius with fans all over the world. Nerdy ones, but still fans.

I nod. “Your research on lab-grown red blood cells is fascinating. Do you really think they’d perform better than donated ones?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Meg smiling, but I'm too invested in Sari's reply to wonder why she looks so happy.

"They're all fresh, so yes. Donated ones contain cells of varying ages, while manufactured cells last longer in the body," he easily explains.

"Patients who regularly need blood may not need transfusions as often." I bet everybody can hear the awe filling my voice.

"I can show you some of the results if you like." Sari's words just make my fucking day.

I see Uri opening his mouth with a sour expression on his face, but Raph cuts in before his brother can express his displeasure. "We can come to your lab on Wednesday. I need to check a few things at the office." He takes my hand and places it on his knee, holding it there. And I let him since I'm a bit intimidated by the people around me. His family, who I want to like me, right?

Sari nods again.

"Great," I hurriedly say, not trying to hide my enthusiasm.

"You're late! I'm starving," Uri abruptly barks, and I turn once again toward the door, where a blonde man in a three-piece blue suit is standing. His cold, grey eyes land on me, making me shiver with discomfort. He looks confident and fancy, exuding power all around.

"Why didn't you eat at one of your burger shacks?" he placidly offers.

"Shacks? Too average fast food for the big shot lawyer?" Uri's annoyance is evident in his retort.

Meg is lifting her eyes heavenward in a give-me-some-patience-dear-lord expression.

"Yes," the guy deadpans, unbuttoning his suit jacket before sitting at the head of the table

“You got issues,” Rague interjects. “Burgers are one of the foundations of this country.”

“It actually started in Medieval Russia, where soldiers ground the meat to make it easier to eat. Then it moved to fourteenth-century Germany, where they added spice to the meat and, finally, the US...”

“Whose side are you on?” Uri raises his pierced brow at Sari, shutting him up.

“Not on the cheap burger side, I presume.”

“Gabe, you unfeeling machine, take that stick out of your ass.” Rami stalks into the room, snorting at the elegant dude before flopping himself on the chair next to mine. “Hey Mike, how’s the family meeting going so far? Am I still your favorite bro?”

“You wish,” I sniff.

“Ready to bolt yet?” he stage-whispers, placing his open hand near the side of his mouth.

I narrow my eyes at him, but it’s Raph’s growl that make him huff.

“So touchy,” Rami mumbles.

The swinging door on the other side of the room opens and an old man wearing a server’s black uniform comes in, holding a tray with three baskets full of fragrant-looking bread and two carafes of water. He places everything on the table and then, in an impeccable Downtown Abbey-like accent, he says to Meg, “Dinner is ready. May I start serving, madam?”

“Yes, thank you Ferdinand.”

“Drinks?” he adds.

One by one, everybody answers. Ferdinand finally turns to me. “Dr. Caldwell, what would you like?”

“Water is fine. And please, call me Michael.” I give him what I hope is a kind smile.

“Very well, Michael. Ferdinand, at your service.” That’s a bit intense, but everybody in this family is. Why would the house staff be an exception?

“You’re a coroner, right?” Gabe asks me when Ferdinand leaves.

“Among other things. Forensic pathologist is actually more specific.” I sound a bit defensive, but I can’t help it against the probing gaze he has focused on me.

“What’s the difference?” Rague asks, tossing a whole piece of bread inside his cavernous mouth, almost making the buttons on his front shirt pop open with the movement.

“Coroners aren’t usually physicians; they aren’t trained in medicine, forensic medicine, or forensic science,” Sari says. “A medical examiner or forensic pathologist is required to be certified in the medical specialty of forensic pathology, and experienced in the forensic sciences. But nowadays, coroner, medical examiner, and forensic pathologist are kind of interchangeable.” When he finishes explaining, Sari shoots me a look that seems to say, *‘right?’*

I nod with a small smile on my lips. And they say don’t meet your heroes. He’s so incredibly smart, but down to earth. Beautiful, almost ethereal.

“I work for the Grand View Hospital, and in addition to determining cause of death through autopsy, I’m also responsible for identifying the body, notifying the next of kin, signing the death certificate, and returning any personal belongings found on the body to the family of the deceased—which is usually a coroner job. I also conduct or order an inquest into the manner or cause of death.”

“Sounds like a full-time job,” Rague says.

“Grand View is the second biggest hospital in the city of Chicago. But the doctors are pretty good. That means less work for me.”

“Oh, how’s the Rope Killer case going?” Meg asks.

“How do you...?” I turn to look at Raph.

He just lifts his eyes to Rami, and I glare at the gym rat.

“What? It’s not Mission Impossible top-secret information. Plus, the police are doing a horrendous job at finding them,” he says with not an ounce of guilt, before thanking Ferdinand for the bottle of beer he placed on the table.

“How do you know that?” But as soon as I finish talking, I know the answer to my question. “You hacked into the police database.”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘hacking’ when a child with a laptop, a few Redbulls, and some time to spare could do it.” He shrugs.

“A child with Redbulls?” I vacillate between giving him a derisive laugh and a hard slap on the head.

“Rami, you have the emotional intelligence of a cabbage,” Gabe mutters flatly.

“He looks more like a beet to me,” Rague chips in.

“A peach with all the fuzzy hair on his face.” Sounds like Sari put some thought into it.

“A banana,” Uri says. We all look at him, mostly with confused expressions. “He looks stupid... like a banana.”

“Fuckyouverymuch.” Rami flips him off and then swings the middle finger to the others.

“We have a guest; can you please act like adults for once?” Meg huffs. Now I understand why she uses the term *kids* when talking about them.

“So, Rope Killer?” Uri asks, looking eager.

“Lame name.” Gabe shakes his head slowly.

Everybody around the table is grunting or nodding, like the serial killer nickname police.

Meg keeps looking at me with a softness in her eyes that unsettles me for some weird reason.

“But it’s true. He uses some kind of metal rope to strangle his victims,” Rami interjects. “Five, that we know of. All males. All young.”

“All male and young... what else?” Uri looks at me expectantly. The wariness is gone, replaced by interest.

“We all have clearance here, Michael. You can talk freely about the case,” Meg says, surely reading the hesitancy all over my face.

Clearance from the police? Like Raph had when he came to the morgue? Money really can buy most things.

But should I talk about an open case with a group of acquaintances? I look at Raph. Those deep green eyes are studying me intently, making sure I’m okay. And silently asking me to trust him.

Oh, fuck it!

“Actually, the first three were barely adults.” Rague lets out an angry, rumbling growl at that. Nobody seems to notice or care. I clear my throat and continue, “But the last two, one was in his twenties and the other in his thirties. They all had light brown hair and blue eyes and looked younger than their age, probably due to their thin build.”

“Did the police find any connection?” Uri is the one asking again.

“No. They had different jobs. Lived in different areas in Chicago. Went to different schools. No interests in common,” Raph replies. He must have read those police reports.

“I asked Serena to check through facial recognition if she can spot any of the victims together somewhere in the city in the last six months. But she found nothing.”

“Shouldn’t you leave that to the police?” I turn to Rami.

“As I said, they are the worst detectives ever. And they are working on two other cases on top of this one.” He shakes his head. “That Spencer detective didn’t even ask you about the attempted robbery. He should check for links between the convenience store and the morgue episodes.”

Fuck, that’s true. Maybe I should have said something.

“I’m not going to put your safety in those incapable hands. Polsner ogles you when he should be catching a killer.” Raph places his arm on the back of my chair.

“Detective Polsner doesn’t ogle me,” I retort with a snort. Raph’s hand falls on my nape and squeezes.

“A love triangle.” Uri narrows his eyes at me. I really want to punch him in his handsome face.

“The real question is: why did the police choose you? Of all the forensic pathologists in Chicago with more experience with violent crimes, why you?” Gabe asks, looking straight at me.

“Yeah, you just moved to the city a few months ago. Why ask you?” Uri adds.

“Don’t,” Raph hisses.

I shush him, squeezing his hand. I do like his protectiveness when he doesn’t smother me with it. But this is a test. His family is assessing me. And I won’t cower behind him. Plus, I’m still half-upset at him from before. “I’m a hematologist,” I simply say, lifting my chin slightly upwards to hopefully show those fuckers where they can shove it.

“Why would the police want a doctor who specializes in diseases of the blood and blood components for a strangling murder?” Sari’s voice is empty of any suspicion. He’s just curious.

“Can I tell them? Pleeeeease?” Rami asks me, almost jumping on his chair like a cute dog—a very large, cute dog.

“Fine.”

Ferdinand is placing delicious dishes on the table and my stomach rumbles again at the sight, making me forget for a second what we’re talking about. Raph takes my plate and starts piling food on top of it, and I can’t stop my smile at his sweet gesture. I’m starving.

“The victims were all affected by... hemophilia,” Rami pauses for effect.

“That’s interesting,” Meg says while taking a sip from her glass of water.

“Why is it interesting?” Rague mumbles as he shoves mashed potatoes and gravy inside his mouth.

“Because the killer targets men whose blood doesn’t clot properly,” Meg explains.

“So why does he strangle them?” Sari pushes his glasses up his cute nose.

“What do you mean?” Uri asks him. He’s sitting so close to Sari that their elbows are rubbing together.

“A person who inherited hemophilia bleeds profusely when injured,” Sari clarifies.

“They can even have spontaneous bleeding incidents,” I chime in, trying to keep up with the conversation. But this roast beef is melting in my mouth.

“Exactly. So why does the killer just strangle them?” Sari repeated.

“Did the victim have other wounds?” Meg asks.

“No,” Raph replies.

“It can’t be a coincidence that all the victims have the same disease. If the killer doesn’t enjoy the sight of blood, why pick victims specifically with hemophilia?” Sari asks.

Why indeed, I ask myself while gulping down more food.

“It could be related to an obsession.” Meg’s voice sounds solemn and professional. “Some serial killers have an ideal victim; a fantasy. Others’ preferences are based on a combination of what victims are available and desirable. No one knows for sure why a serial killer will choose a certain individual as their victim. The most common belief is that the killer wants to feel complete control over another person. They thrive on the fear their victims display and see murder as the ultimate form of dominance over a human being.”

“But he strangles them from behind,” Rami says. “He doesn’t look at their faces while he kills them.”

“Coward,” Rague snarls.

“Maybe he feels the push to kill, but he thinks it’s not right. He feels guilty?” Uri suggests.

“Or he likes to feel them fighting against him,” Gabe’s adds.

The idea is creepy; could it really be the truth?

“Or it’s the gurgling sounds they make, and not the sight he craves?”

Another disturbing image, from Raph this time.

“All valid hypotheses. The victims are killed in a very vulnerable position.”

Meg nods almost proudly. This is what I always thought Dexter’s family would chit-chat about during a meal.

“So they know the killer.” I look at Raph, remembering him saying something about it.

“Yeah, babe.” His close-mouthed smile makes me all warm inside.

“Babe?” Gabe frowns.

“Told you.” Rami coughs the words into his fisted, gloved hand. He doesn’t take those gloves off, even when he eats.

“Could be. I’d need to check those police files first.” Meg winks at me. I guess all our detective talks at the diner weren’t a new thing for her, if murders and killers are usual topics at her dinner table.

“The crime scene and the victim’s position and state could tell a lot about the killer,” Uri offers.

“The Rope Killer leaves them in a supine or sitting position, arms on their sides,” Raph tells him.

“Serena, email Meg the Rope Killer’s police files, please,” Rami says out loud. And just then, I notice the earpiece he’s wearing. Wow, that’s really cool.

“To me as well.” Gabe tilts his chin at Rami.

“Me too.” Uri and Sari say together.

“Serena, just email it to everybody.”

After that, Sari and I start talking about his past research for a while we eat. The food is to die for, and the current conversation is stimulating.

Until Rami opens his trap again. “Okay, are we really ignoring the Dumbo in the dining room?”

Raph stiffens next to me, but nobody utters a word.

“Ramiel,” Meg warns him. *Ramiel*? That’s Rami’s whole name?

“I mean, Raph turned Mike’s neck into *join the dots*.” Rami sneers, pointing at the hickeys and bruises on my neck. My hand automatically flies to my collarbone. The round collar of my shirt is loose around my neck, making the marks quite visible. Weirdly, Raph has relaxed next to me. While I’m blushing like a nun at a porn convention.

“Fuck,” Rague says staring at my neck.

“A bit of roughness during casual sex is not a big deal.” Gabe tilts his head to one side in a stiff, robot-like gesture.

He exchanges a long stare with Raph. *Casual sex?* I know exactly what the douche is implying, and his words piss me the hell off. My fingers tighten around the fork I’m holding.

But the small, evil tilt at the corner of Raph’s lips stops me from replying.

Gabe takes a sip of his wine just as Raph answers nonchalantly, “Stop harassing my boyfriend.”

I gasp, followed by someone else. Don’t know who, since I’m utterly focused on Raph’s serious face.

Gabe chokes on his drink, coughing loudly and spitting it all over the table.

I can clearly see Raph trying to bite back the grin of satisfaction.

“Your *what?*” Uri’s hazel eyes are wide.

“Boyfriend,” Sari exclaims.

“Fuck,” Rague swears once again, his square jaw going slack.

“What the hell, C-3PO! Say it, don’t spray it!” Rami sneers, using his napkin to clean his glass and surroundings. “Give me a heads-up next time,” he tells Raph.

Ferdinand quickly appears to fix the small mess.

Gabe glares the fire of hell at Raph, while patting his mouth dry with a cloth napkin, like a true gentleman.

Raph is giving an impassive expression, placing some vegetables on my empty plate. I can’t thank him. Can’t form a single word. My brain has shut down and there’s an alarm blaring inside my head, repeating the word boyfriend. Boyfriend. B-O-Y-F-R-I-E-N-D.

“Raph, that’s lovely.” Sari excitedly claps his hands.

“It really is.” Meg looks at us for a moment with eyes full of wonder, and something else. Something I can’t read. Then she lowers her gaze to her plate, seemingly lost in her head.

“Fuck.” Apparently, Rague’s vocabulary has been reduced to one—I have to admit, very fitting and explanatory—word.

“The playboy stopped fooling around,” Gabe says like he’s talking about the weather. His voice is back to his normal stolidness.

Playboy? Does Raph like to fuck around?

“Like a serious relationship,” Uri sounds dubious. “With another person.”

“Do you need proof or something?” Raph scoffs annoyingly.

“They humped each other in front of me earlier, pretty sure they’d be up to a horizontal mambo.”

“Ramiel!” Meg scolds him again. But it’s too late. I already took the matter into my own hands, or fingers, when I pinch his side, fucking hard. Unfortunately, Rami doesn’t jump, jerk, or even gasp. He doesn’t even turn my way. Is he made of steel?

“Are you... sure about this?” Gabe asks Raph, without stopping eating. His apathetic behavior and hidden jabs are really getting on my nerves.

Raph’s hand suddenly squeezes my nape. “Michael is my boyfriend, and you’ll treat him with respect. Otherwise, I’ll turn your lives into a living hell.” Raph’s threatening words are even scarier delivered with such a cold tone.

It’s the most amazing short speech anyone has ever made. Even though he’s again acting like a caveman, deciding all alone that we’re a couple. And announcing it in front of his family! Conflicting feelings are battling inside of me. On one hand, I’m spinning pirouettes at the thought of being really his. But another part of me is still ticked off by Raph’s omissions.

“Michael, you are part of this family.” Meg’s solemn statement turns everybody still. Me included. “If any of the kids give you a hard time, just let me know.”

“Thank you.” My voice sounds raspy. Her words hit me hard. Did she really mean them? “But I won’t. I prefer to get rid of unwanted problems by myself,” I finish, raising a challenging eyebrow at certain people around the table. Again, I won’t back away and shrink. I know I’m surrounded by wolves. I can feel their dominance coming out in waves, just like Raph’s commanding energy. But it strangely doesn’t scare me... much.

Rami whistles, while Rague gives me a feral smile. Sari nods; next to him, Uri crosses his arms, making my eyes roll. Gabe keeps staring at me, still as a statue. Four out of six is not bad. I avoid Raph’s eyes, turning toward Ferdinand to thank him as he takes away the dirty plates.

The conversation moves to Rague’s latest demolition and construction project in a run-down neighborhood. But I’m only half-listening, still confused by everything that has happened today. Then the cakes arrives, and nothing else matters.

“Chocolate velvet cake, pear and cream and dulcis in fundo, pecan-lime pie.” Meg smiles brightly.

Everybody takes a slice, even Gabe. But not Rami. Maybe he doesn’t like sweets. I, of course, get all three of them, moaning around every bite.

“Pecan-lime wins again, guys,” Uri sighs.

“Agreed,” Sari says.

“Chocolate velvet,” Rague mumbles around a huge forkful of brown and red cake.

“Pear,” Raph chips in, surprising me. Guess cakes must be a family thing.

“I’m out. See you later, bros.” Rami suddenly stands up and leaves the room with a wave. Meg watches him with a heavy gaze.

“Pear and cream,” Gabe says.

“Michael?” Meg asks me.

“Hmm.” Everybody is looking at me again; it’s so damn intimidating.

“Pear.”

“Of course he said pear. He had to agree with his boyfriend,” Uri whines.

“I’d never do that. Desserts are sacred to me. The pecan-lime is amazing, but I love pears. And this is the queen of all the pear pies I’ve ever eaten.” I sniff haughty at him.

A heated conversation about which is actually the queen of pies starts at the table, but Raph’s soft words distract me from it.

“I fucking want you,” he growls.

The low rumbling of his voice near my ear sends a firing arrow straight to my dick and balls.

“Now,” he whispers, moving his thumb up and down my neck.

“I’m... Are you crazy?” I’m still trying to put some order among my thoughts and emotions. And we are surrounded by his family, for crying out loud.

“You know that superior tone turns my cock into granite.”

I turn to look at him, trying to catch my breath. His dirty, bold talk always makes me lose my mind. “Oh my god, you have to stop looking at me like that.” I sound too damn breathless.

“Like what, babe?” he asks, quirking the corner of his lips up in a hungry grin.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. You’re... eating me with your eyes,” I accuse him. His hand is suddenly on my thigh, trailing quickly

upward until it strokes lightly against the bump inside my jeans.

“I can’t. Because I’m imagining how your tight, wet hole is going to feel slowly loosening around my cock with each deep, hard pump I give it.”

Holy shit! My... boyfriend just set me on fucking fire. I’m burning from within, and my ass is clenching and unclenching, eager to be filled. I’m about to cave, when I remember where I am and jump up, almost tipping the chair over.

“What’s wrong?” Meg seems worried. Damn it.

“Just need the toilet.” I smile nervously, hurriedly rounding the chair and discreetly trying to cover my hard-on with the high back.

Ferdinand comes to my aid. “Please, let me show you.” I follow him quickly without a backward glance.

As soon as I lock the bathroom door, my body deflates on top of the toilet. I’m a fucking mess. Raph’s omission hurt me, but I know what’s really happening here. I know why I’m acting all conflicted and scaredy cat-y. It’s obvious that I’m afraid. Afraid what Raph will do when he discovers... No, I refuse to think about it.

I walk to the sink and splash some cold water on my face. Some ends up on the cuff of the shirt, soaking it uncomfortably. Instead of pulling up the sleeve, I squeeze the fabric between my fingers, closing my eyes tightly.

He called me his boyfriend. I’d be a liar if I said that single word didn’t make me incredibly happy. And instead of celebrating with his dick tapping my prostate, I’m throwing a pity party in a very luxurious bathroom. I mean, is the faucet made of gold? And the light green hand towel I use to dry my face is as soft as a baby’s butt.

I run a hand through my blonde strands, trying to adjust the already perfect hairstyle. I give myself another minute to regain some composure. When I

feel *fine* enough, I open the door and stop over the threshold.

“You said you wanted a tour.” Raph is leaning on the wall, arm outstretched as his intense eyes study my face. He doesn’t attempt to touch me, just leaves his finger hanging in the air close to mine.

After taking a big breath, I grab his hand. As always, the contact sends a prickling sensation over my body. My heart picks up as Raph threads his fingers through mine and then leads me toward the huge staircase. The thick marble steps are covered by a red carpet all the way to the first floor. The handrails on both sides are black with minimalist gold finishing touches. The metal feels cold under my palm.

“Meg didn’t change much around the house after her parents died,” Raph says. And that explains a lot. The place doesn’t match the Meg I know.

We turn right on the landing and move past a few white doors before stopping in front of a blue one. Raph pushes it open, and I know instantly that this is his room. The walls are light blue, contrasting with the azure curtains covering the tall window and the sapphire spread over the king-sized bed. A big, wooden desk sits against a wall. Apart from a digital clock on top of it, the surface is empty. The walls are bare too. One of the two doors on the left shows an ensuite bathroom, even more opulent than the one downstairs.

“This is your room,” I say, half-spinning and facing him again.

“Was. I don’t live here anymore.”

I watch him extend his arm above his head and reach between his shoulder blades to grab his shirt.

He pulls it off, and my brain goes in slow motion mode, enjoying the unhurried reveal of his delicious abs, tanned skin, perfectly defined pecs, dark nipples, and muscled neck. His piercing eyes find mine, and there’s so

much heat in those green depths. I still can't believe it's aimed at me. He opens the three buttons on his jeans, one after the other with deft, steady fingers. And then...then he starts stalking toward me.

"What are you doing?" I don't realize I'm walking backward until I feel the hard wall behind my spine. Raph splays his hand next to my head, while the other cups my cheek. His thumb strokes my lower lip, pushing it down. He has a glint in his eyes as he pushes his finger inside my mouth all the way. I instinctively suck on it, my tongue tasting the hint of salt on his skin. It twists around his finger while he begins pumping it in and out. It's such an erotic and dirty act, mimicking what we both really want. I need this right now, not to think. Just feel.

He grabs my hand and grunts when he pushes it inside his boxers. He's always so hard for me. It mesmerizes me. Its thickness and warmth. The weight in my palm and the smoothness of the pink skin. How did I wait this long to have him in my mouth? Raph kept me in this lust-filled trance that has been so damn overpowering, that's how. Not anymore.

I pull my head back, his slick thumb gliding out from my lips. I slide down on my knees, taking his jeans and boxers down with me. His beautiful cock slaps against his hard abs, leaving a thin trail of precum on his belly. I'm salivating, licking my lips at the sight of his delicious length. Raph grabs the base, pointing his cock toward my lips. The other hand is firmly fisting my hair and pushing me toward the head. He paints my lips, stroking the dripping cum over my mouth, and I lick it all up eagerly.

"Just like that, babe. Taste the only cock flavor you'll have from now on."

His possessive words spur me on, and I suck the whole head between my lips, my tongue mining the slit for more. His head falls back, a growl coming straight from his chest. I push my mouth onward, the corners

stretching to the maximum while I keep sliding more cock in until it hits the back of my throat, taking my breath away for a second. I remember to relax and inhale with my nose.

I've always been quite good at blowing but have never craved it like I do now. And I want it to be the best he's ever had. The only one he can remember. I squeeze my throat around him and moan, hoping he'll like the vibration.

He growls again, fisting my hair harder and pushing his dick a little deeper. My nose sinks into his pubic hair. I love his musky male smell; it makes my own shaft twitch and leak, making a mess inside my pants. My mouth is so fucking full, and I can barely breathe. But when I look up, the crazy look in his eyes and the sight of his clenched jaw almost makes me cum on the spot.

My hands fall on his thighs. My fingers start playing with his balls. He thrusts his hips back and then slowly forward again, keeping my head still while he fucks my mouth.

"So fucking good. Want to live in your mouth," he groans. His eyes are focused on his hard cock pumping in and out. I feel saliva dripping down my chin, tears wetting my cheeks. And although I'm surely a mess to look at, I'm so hot for him. The powerful feeling I get from giving him such bliss on my knees is exhilarating. I let my desire fuel me and start hollowing my cheeks every time his cock tries to leave my mouth.

His breathing is coming hard and fast, and his fingers dig into my scalp as his hips find a faster rhythm. Holy hell, he's gorgeous. I can't stop moaning around his meaty dick, and it seems like it's driving him crazy. I reach down inside my pants to stroke myself as I watch him. My lips tighten even more around him, and I give him as much suction as I humanly can.

I swallow repeatedly around his length, massaging his head with my throat as I work even harder to milk him out. But suddenly he yanks my head back, pulling out of my mouth. In the next second, I'm up and dizzily facing the wall while Raph strips me of my shoes and pants. He pushes my hips back till my ass is sticking out and opens my legs impossibly wide. Then he spits on my puckered hole a couple of times before his finger begins to stroke it.

He pushes just the tip, and the sting is very real. It's been months since I've been fucked; long before I moved to Chicago. But I have a big dildo I like to stick on my shower wall and have fun with when I'm in the right mood.

His other hand grabs my dick and starts rubbing. His face falls on my nape, mouthing at my skin. I let myself relax and his finger slips inside. More wetness drips on my entrance and I turn my head back, craving the dirty sight. Raph's mouth is open, letting a thread of saliva fall down his fingers, slicking my hole perfectly for a second digit to spear inside.

"Yes!" I whimper.

"We won't need any fucking lube if you keep opening up so easily with all the spit I'm shoving inside." He licks his lips while staring at my ass and I realize I'm fucking myself on his fingers when he adds a third one. I'm unable to stop, even though I can feel the burn. He crooks them, touching my prostate, and my porno scream is stifled by his rough mouth. He's ramming his fingers inside me at a tempo too fast for me to follow.

"I can't believe I'm inside you. Touching you." His low voice is filled with hot desire and awe.

So are the next words that come from my lust-filled, thoughtless brain.

"Take me raw," I beg him. I know I'm being an idiot, especially after

hearing his brother comment on Raph's whorish ways. But right now, I don't seem to care.

"Wouldn't do it any other way with you. Only with you. Never with anyone else."

His fingers abruptly leave my hole, and then his cock is pushing in.

"Feel it, Michael. My cock taking you," he snarls near my ear, holding my cheek against the wall. His hand has stilled on my dick, just squeezing at the base.

I gasp at the stinging intrusion. My eyes roll back into my head at the feel of him spearing me. So eager for more. Oh shit. I fucking need him.

"I'm shoving inch after inch inside you. How is it, babe?"

A weird choking sound is my reply. It gets mixed with Raph's rumble when he bottoms out.

I can barely form thoughts anymore, let alone words.

I close my eyes, losing all sense of where I end and he begins. Full. So full. I can feel him throbbing inside me. I hear a tearing sound, and when I feel his mouth licking my shoulder, I realize he tore the back of my shirt. If I thought I couldn't be hornier than this, I was mistaken. My body goes supernova. Raph grabs my hair and yanks me closer. I gasp in surprise as the sharp sting spreads across my scalp and rolls down my spine. I love the sensation of his hard bare chest against my back.

He then wraps his palm around my throat, not pressing hard enough to cut off my breathing, but enough to hold me in place while he begins pounding into me, filling me over and over. The obscene sounds of his balls slapping against my ass, and of my drenched hole being rut ruthlessly spark a rush of raw need over my skin. My toes curl, and beads of sweat form all over my body.

The slight deprivation of air is sending jolts of pleasure rocketing along my back. My ass is bouncing on his long dick, my head thrown back on his shoulder in ecstasy as I'm trying to match his violent thrusts. I wonder how rough he could get with me.

"More. Harder." My words end with a groan as he runs a finger over my slit. He's finally jerking me again. My aching cock deeply appreciates it.

"From now on, I'll get inside you every chance I get. Your strangling hole will keep me warm and satisfied." He grunts the desire-filled words on my cheek. And fuck, I want that.

I try to shift, but he pushes me even closer to him, placing my hands on the back of his hard thighs, silently telling me not to move them. I love his dominance when we fuck. Love to be taken, possessed, to feel this wanted. Thoughts of him consume me, and I hope he feels the same way about me.

"Bite my arm, babe," he orders me, without stopping or slowing down his restless assault on my ass.

I hesitate for a half-second, but then turn my head and sink my teeth into his meaty bicep, unable to stop until I taste his sweet blood inside my mouth. The hand around my neck jerks and his pounding rhythm falters.

"Love to see your marks on me." He's staring at my teeth imprints with half-lidded eyes. "Want to see that bloody mouth sucking on my cock."

I moan in compliance, his words encouraging me to stop thinking altogether and follow my most base instincts.

"So. Fucking. Perfect." He punctuates each word with a violent thrust that has my legs trembling. My ass is contracting around him with every pump of his fist on my cock. My shoulders and neck are aching with tension.

I don't want to miss a second of what he's doing to me. "Raph," I breathe his name. "I-I want to see you."

Raph halts his hips immediately and makes me cry for how fast he pulls out and flips me with my back to the wall. His hands grip me under my thighs and lift me up, forcing me to wrap my legs around him. The next moment, he's opening my ass cheeks wide and his cock plows right back in, making me scream in pleasure-pain. He doesn't give me a second to accommodate and starts jackhammering my loose hole like his life depends on it. He's so damn beautiful, all sweaty and drunk-looking. His lips are slightly parted, cheeks red, and his hair feels so soft between my fingers.

The feel of his hard body against mine is mind blowing, his belly rubbing my cock with each thrust. His sweat-soaked skin beneath my palms, the way his back muscles move and flex. He slides one hand into my hair again, pulling on my strands to slant our mouths together. His kiss is hungry, his tongue and teeth forcefully working my mouth. He's driving into me, pulling almost all the way out and then slamming home, his thick cock dragging over my prostate with every incredible thrust.

He pulls his mouth back just an inch, our lips still touching. "Forgive me, Michael," he suddenly chokes out.

"What?" It's all I'm able to utter before moaning like a whore. God, it feels like his cock was made for fucking me. And having him bareback multiples my pleasure.

He pushes deep inside of me one more time and then stops all together. "Forgive me, babe. I need you to forgive me," he says again. I can almost hear a hint of plea inside his voice. And when I lift my eyes to his, I can see exigency and determination.

He slides his cock all the way out, leaving only the head inside. Then he suddenly rams all of it back in. "Forgive. Me." He fucks the words into me.

“Not fair,” I whimper. But it’s true I haven’t forgiven him yet. And in doing it, I’m making both of us miserable. Because I’m holding back. Even now that I have him filling me to the brim. We couldn’t be closer, but I’m keeping a part of me in check.

“I…” He slams into me again and a strangled cry leaves my lips instead of words.

“Say it. I need you with me, babe. Say it.”

“I forgive you,” I sob, letting myself go completely.

Taking a slow, shaky breath, he pushes his forehead to mine. “You are mine. Understood? Fucking mine. All of you.”

I nod. His bright eyes find mine. In this silent moment there’s so much we’re saying. The soundless words are floating around us, wrapped in hushed, deep emotions. And I let them fill me, just like Raph has filled my life.

After a few more seconds, he slides his arms under my thighs, pushing them open and tilting my pelvis higher. My shirt is falling over my shoulder, but I don’t take it off; my hands are locked behind his neck. He starts pumping his hips, slowly at first, but quickly reaching a bruising rhythm. I hold onto him and let him rile me. He shifts slightly, and the head of his dick is again hitting my sweet spot. I let out a helpless gasp.

“Right there,” I whisper. “Don’t stop.”

He makes a sound that’s almost a snarl, his hips pistoning again and again until I explode in a million pieces. My scream reaches the gates of Heaven. He groans low in his throat and his thrusts turn fast and shallow, then he roars like a damn bear and shoots all the way deep inside me. More spurts of cum come out of my cock at the feel of him filling me up. He’s still

grunting, eyes almost closed, lips open in bliss. I push my tongue into his mouth and suck hard.

Raph curls my trembling legs around his waist again, making me whimper at the feel of his half-hard cock pushing deeper in me. His large hands are rubbing up and down my body. After several minutes, I feel Raph's long fingers rubbing over my stretched, and still very full, hole. Wetness starts leaking out.

I let him explore but I can't stop the unhappy moan leaving my chest when his cock slides out of me. He quickly replaces it with two thick fingers though, chasing away the emptiness that assailed me. He's gathering his cum and pushing it back, keeping it inside.

"I want to continue filling you. Making you mine," Raph whispers, making my body shiver in response.

"Are you mine?" I boldly ask, looking straight into his green eyes.

His reply rumbles up his chest, "Fuck, yes. Can't get rid of me anymore."

"Don't want to," I confess, feeling the truth in my words.

"Good." He slaps my ass hard and then kisses me.

"We need to go back downstairs," I say with a long sigh.

He blinks a couple of times before pulling out his fingers and letting my feet fall back to the ground. I feel deliciously sore, and empty without any part of him filling me. But we'll have time to do this all over again later. Instead of starting to gather his clothes, Raph grabs my wrist. "Whatever happens, Michael, remember. We belong together."

The words sound ominous, like he's expecting something bad to happen. But the resolute, unwavering way he's staring at me soothes the foreboding feeling.

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Chapter 11

MICHAEL

When I come out of the bathroom, finally presentable again, Raph is on the phone. It's a work-related call, and I make my way downstairs alone to give him some privacy. Meg is coming out of the empty dining room when I arrive. Thank God everybody left, because Raph's too-large shirt and my quite disheveled appearance scream '*thoroughly fucked*' to the four winds. I'm still riding my afterglow train and facing his brothers again right now would ruin that. Although I'd love to chat more with Sari.

"Good, just the person I wanted to talk to." Meg's smiling, but there's still a strange thread of uneasiness between us. "Come with me."

We turn into a long corridor studded with doors. After stopping in front of the last one, she gestures for me to enter a nice room. It looks like an office. A huge, old wooden desk sits on the right. It has a Tiffany lamp on one side and some papers on the other—guess Meg is not a messy-bessy like me. My mind goes back to the morgue and the disaster I still need to organize.

My gaze snags on the big fireplace in front of me, flanked by two big windows. Through the white curtains, I can see part of the garden at the back of the property, which tells me this room is at the corner of the house. This place is so big, I can easily get lost.

Two small sofas face each other on the left, but Meg points to one of the two armchairs near the desk and sits on the other one. When I park my ass down, she asks if I'd like a drink, but I politely refuse.

"What do you want to talk about?" I know I can be direct with Meg; there's no need to use a more diplomatic approach.

"You and Raphael."

Maybe she isn't as approving as I originally thought? "What about us?"

"When he said you were his boyfriend... you looked as surprised as we all were by his claim."

"Yes, I was surprised since we never talked about what we are to each other beforehand."

"Did it bother you?"

I suddenly feel like this is a psychiatric evaluation, more than a chat between friends.

"Of course it did. But I kind of like it as well." I feel my cheeks heating.

"Do you know why he behaves the way he does?"

I narrow my eyes at her, feeling the uneasiness crawling under my skin.

"He told me... about his past," I say, not feeling comfortable enough to talk about it without him present.

Meg nods. "That's not the main reason why he acts differently than most people."

"What do you mean?" I ask her, my shoulders tensing. A thought that has tried to infiltrate my head multiple times comes slithering back again.

“I think you know exactly what I mean,” Meg utters without giving me the possibility to not face the truth.

“He’s a psychopath, isn’t he?”

Meg nods. “He’s what they call a *good* psychopath.”

“Good psychopaths are able to successfully integrate themselves into society, right?”

Meg seems surprised by my knowledge of the subject.

“I followed a seminar a few years ago on psychological deficiencies. Psychopathy was part of it.” I was fascinated by it. At that time, I also wondered if I could recognize the main psychopathic traits in people I interacted with. I guess I can.

“What do you know about it?”

I try to remember what I learned. “It’s a personality disorder defined by a combination of charm, shallow emotions, absence of regret or remorse, impulsivity and—” I swallow hard “—criminality.” The enchanting way he charmed the dean of Grand View pops into my head. He became another person before my eyes. All pleasantness and sociability.

“But violent behavior is not a requirement for a diagnosis of psychopathy. It’s also not true that individuals with psychopathy are uncontrollably evil, unable to feel emotions, and incorrigible. They do tend toward impulsive and risky behaviors, take advantage of others, and show little concern for the consequences of their actions. Those traits can be observed in politicians, CEOs and financiers. I mean, look at Trump.” She shakes her head. “Because of popular—and, in part, erroneous TV series—people are accustomed to seeing psychopaths as almost robotic.”

“They do lack the normal range of emotions. Have a reduced ability to process emotions and to recognize those of others.” Raph’s sometimes odd

responses to my emotions come to mind.

“Yes, and deficits in detecting threats and a reduced response to fear until it’s too late can be a sign of psychopathy.”

“How?” I ask.

“For example: a psychopath walks into a dark alley at night, but he doesn't realize the potential for danger. When confronted with it, they may start to notice the threat and feel fearful, and thus respond violently. It's only at the end that they think: ‘Oh, this is bad news.’”

“So Raph, he’s...”

“I can assure you, he is a psychopath. Although I’ve had him with me since he was ten, there are still currently no treatments available that are truly effective against this disorder.”

Her words feed the dread inside of me. I try to think clearly, but my teeth grind at the thought of Raph being in any way... wrong. Because he isn’t.

“Linda, my wife and I, have shown him a way to successfully be part of the community.”

“How?” I attempt to focus on the conversation.

“By helping him identify and experience emotions under the right circumstances. In the context of observing emotional scenes or faces, the pain of others, and experiences of regret. He’s now able to process those emotions when focusing on them. And he can use that information to regulate his behavior if it is directly relevant to his objective.”

“He can fake it, you mean. But I was under the belief that all psychopaths are actually good at pretending.” Was he pretending with me in his bedroom? I hate myself for thinking it. No. Raph meant every word he said to me.

“Usually, they can keep up the charade only for short amounts of time. That’s why they never get really close to anybody. But I didn’t want that for Raphael. So, I decided to follow a specific treatment designed to help him through parental intervention. It enhanced the emotional warmth of the caregiver and helped him to identify emotions, and massively reduced symptoms and problematic behavior.”

“So, love and psychology worked?”

“Partly.”

Partly? “Because of what happened to him... to all of your sons before you found them?”

“Yes. But Raphael’s an amazing person today, mostly due to himself.”

“He is amazing.” I feel myself smiling, before a coughing fit hits Meg. I grab the bottle of water lying on a small table and go crouch next to her. It feels like *déjà vu*. The cough is not as severe as the one at Marnie’s. After a few seconds she stops, grabs the bottle, and drinks almost all of it. The redness on her cheeks is already fading by the time I stand up with my hands on my hips.

“You need to be more open with your sons about your condition. They get worried.”

“They shouldn’t. I’m fine,” she replies stubbornly.

“Why am I here? What do you want from me?” I ask her.

She ignores my questions. “You and Raphael are... I didn’t expect *that*. You’re good with him. He’s very protective of you, but you don’t let him go overboard. And my other sons like you.”

I snort, thinking about Gabe and Uri’s suspicious questioning and Rague’s confusing behavior. Not to mention Rami’s endless teasing. But maybe that’s just him being himself, seeing as he does it with everybody.

“Please. Raph had to threaten them at the table.”

“My kids are skeptical by nature. They don’t trust strangers. But trust me when I say you’re already one foot in.” She smiles smugly, like she arranged all this, and it’s all going according to plan. Maybe my crime-filled brain is affecting my view on the matter a little. And more suspicious thoughts cross my mind. “The first time we met at the cafeteria... Was that a coincidence?”

I read the answer in the wince scrunching her face. *Fuck. Me.* What the hell is actually going on?

“Why, Meg? Why did you befriend me? What could you possibly want?” I ask, feeling betrayal and confusion hit me equally in the chest.

“Michael, I just wanted to get to know you.”

“Why? And give me a straight answer, or I’ll leave right now.” My orgasmic buzz is long gone, crushed by... all of this!

She’s not answering, so I’m about to take a step toward the door when she finally admits, “Because you are one of my kids.”

My breath gets stuck in my lungs. Her words echo on repeat inside my head.

“W-what?” My legs give way, and I drop onto the armchair with enough force to push a swish of air from the cushion. “One of your kids?” I can’t stop blinking; things in front of me look suddenly blurry. Dark, puzzling images shuffle in front of my eyes. And I can’t seem to stop them.

“Breathe, Michael. In and out.” Meg’s voice is closer now. When I turn, she’s standing near my armchair, a glass of amber liquid in her hand. We inverted positions. How much time has passed? And where did my head go? I grab the shiny glass and take an eager sip. The burn of the alcohol grounds me somehow.

“Talk,” I whisper with a raspy voice, my eyes fixed on the gold pen laying on the desk.

“Twenty years ago, Linda was working for a top secret agency. They ordered her to find two scientists who went rogue and were believed to be experimenting on children. Their sick idea was to create assassins without any kind of emotions. No regret, empathy, or any kind of doubts, and they thought kids’ minds were easier molded than adults’. We don’t know if they kidnapped or bribed people, because the kids they experimented on all came from various foster programs. And were all problematic kids, showing psychotic traits.”

“Psychotic traits?” I had *psychotic traits*? “I don’t understand.”

“Clearly, you’re not a psychopath. I’m talking about twenty years ago. It was a very new study, which was ahead of its time. Those scientists didn’t seem to care that sometimes children show psychopathic tendencies that fade when they grow up. Out of all of you, only Raphael is a true psychopath. I found that out when I was called to make sense of the files the scientists wrote on each kid. Very detailed files.” Her voice ends in a whispered breath.

I felt like puking. She must be mistaken.

“I was also there to evaluate the kids and see, after what they suffered, if they could manage to have ordinary lives—whatever that means. It was hard to decide, since those kids were treated solely like test subjects. They didn’t even have names, only numbers.”

Two.

“The burn on Raph’s wrist,” I grit out. The same anger I felt when I learned about it makes me tighten my hold on the empty liquor glass.

“You were Subject One, Michael.”

I turn to face her, my eyes wide as the ocean, frantically checking for some kind of doubt or deception on her face. She's just staring back at me, her gaze open and filled with sorrow. Regret.

I shake my head in disbelief, but something deep inside is telling me it's true. Still, I cannot accept it. It just can't be.

"Wait, I don't have a burn." I turn my wrist up and look at the pale smooth skin.

"They marked the other kids after you... left. You were, as they wrote, a failure. You didn't respond as they hoped. And when they tried to get rid of you...you escaped." Meg moves behind her desk and, after a minute, comes back holding a file. It's a police report dated twenty years ago. "Sheriff Caldwell found you on the edge of a dirt road, not far from the compound where you were all held." There is a thorough description of how the sheriff found a little blond boy covered in blood. When I turn the page, a picture of me as a child stares back at me. I look skinny and disheveled. I'm wearing a big blue T-shirt with the Granville police logo on it, and my eyes seem sad and filled with fear.

"The sheriff got so attached to you since he and his wife lost their son years before that..."

"They adopted me," I finish for her.

My brain is scrambled. In a short period of time, I've gone from disbelief to horror to relief to heartbreak to fear. I'm struggling to wrap my head around things that don't make sense. Or make too much sense.

"You were supposed to come with us, to the group home, since you had no living family. But after a thorough examination, I found out that therapy alone would help you. And you looked like you felt safe with Sheriff Caldwell. You trusted him, probably because he found you on that road. Not

with me or Linda. Only with him. Moreover, you didn't seem to have the same trauma as the others."

"Trauma? Was Raph okay?" Of all the stupid questions I could ask.

She sighs. "You really care about him."

"My head is in mayhem right now, but the only sure thing is that... Fuck! It's... I-I love him." My voice trembles at the end, but it's the first time I've acknowledged the feeling.

"You know that he cannot love you back. Not the way people usually do," Meg tells me, using a very gentle tone.

"I know that." Tears well in my eyes, but I stop them. "He gives me what I need."

"He does?" She sounds curious.

I think about the passionate, claiming sex. All the time he spent taking care of me. His possessiveness. The jealousy, the attentiveness. The over-the-top protectiveness. And I find myself nodding. He trusted me with his dark past. Although now I know it's because I've been part of it.

Then her words from before suddenly hit me again. "Therapy? I never went to therapy. Did I? Why can't I remember anything?" I force my mind to go back, but the first memory I have of my childhood is the day we moved to California when I was eleven.

"It's called dissociation. Sometimes your brain chooses to put up a wall to protect yourself from reliving painful experiences. It's a defense mechanism."

I stare at the picture of me again.

"Will I ever remember?" A part of me hates not knowing what happened. While another part is thankful for the elusive memories; I don't know how I'd react to them.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have an answer to that.”

My brain is in panic mode at the moment. Too much information. Shock. Doubts. Blood pumping.

Covered in blood.

“Why was I covered in blood when I was found?” I ask her, flicking through the file pages.

“You killed the man that was supposed to get rid of you in that forest.” My heart stops. “It was self-defense and, thanks to you, Linda’s team found the other kids and saved them,” she adds quickly but calmly.

What the fuck! I killed someone? My heart is beating again, but at this rate it’s going to fucking explode out of my chest.

Images of the weird dream I had a couple of nights ago come back. A poorly lit road. Me, lying alone on the dirty backseat of a car. My head and chest hurting. There’s a partition between the front seats and the back. The radio is playing an old melancholic song. A man is driving me away. He’s a bad man and I’m afraid. I can see the creepy, black forest from the car window.

“I’m having weird dreams lately,” I tell her. I killed a man.

She leans toward me. “What kind of dreams?”

“I-I think they’re flashes from my past. I’m always a kid in them. But they don’t make sense. They’re a jumble of broken images.” I killed a man... who wanted to kill me. Holy shit.

“When did they start?”

“A couple of months ago. But they’ve been happening more often.” I set the empty glass on the small table. I killed a man in self-defense.

“They might be memories triggered by seeing me or Raphael again,” Meg explains.

“Again?” I ask uneasily.

“You were kept together in the same room for a while, before they took you away,” she tells me.

The shiny green eyes I often see in my dreams, the ones that comfort me, give me strength, and make me smile. They... they are Raph’s. Holy, holy shit!

“Michael, I’m sorry. I know it’s a lot to take in, but it was time.”

“Time?”

“Your moving to Chicago wasn’t a coincidence. I did it. A colleague owed me, but after showing him your amazing resume, he was only happy to send the other medical examiner on an early retirement.”

“The fantastic job opportunity I received at Grand View was pushed by you?” My voice is filled with incredulity.

“You were alone and needed a change.” Meg doesn’t look ashamed in the least.

“How do you know that?”

“I kept an eye on you.” For twenty fucking years? “Your parents were good people, but a bit too set in their own ways. I needed to be sure you were safe. I’m sorry about them, by the way.”

I nod, feeling a knot twisting inside my throat. They did the best they could, even though they never saw me for who I am. Never totally accepted me. Would Raph do the same?

“Why didn’t Raph tell me he knew me? And about my past... He remembers, right?”

“He has a great episodic memory. Unfortunately... or fortunately. Don’t know why he didn’t tell you. You should ask him.”

I stand up, feeling unsteady on my feet. Or maybe it's my head balance that's off.

Another omission. Why did he hide this too?

"I'm in awe of you, Michael. You've turned out great. Living in society, after all you've suffered."

Great? I don't feel great at all. I've always been an outsider. I never felt like I belonged. Never fit in anywhere, even with my family. And I finally know why. From a medical and ethical standpoint, Meg did what she thought was best for me. She tried to give me a shot at a *normal* life. But what if I had stayed with her? With Raph?

It stings to think that I was the only one left alone, while they all remained together. They became a family, leaving me behind.

"So you've been examining me," I say through gritted teeth.

"In a way. I just wanted to make sure you were doing well. Although I didn't raise you, I always thought of you as one of my kids, Michael. I even gave you your name."

"You did?" That fact oddly soothes me a bit.

"I named all of you. After the seven angels from the apocalyptic events in the Book of Revelation."

Memories from my catholic upbringing resurface. "The seven angels that hold the bowls of God's wrath?"

"The plagues God unleashes on the world to cleanse it. Do you remember the names of those angels?"

I search deep in my memory. "Michael is the warrior. Raphael the guardian. Sariel the... watcher?" That's as much as I remember.

"Yes. Ramiel is the carrier of hope; he guides the souls to Heaven. Uriel carries wisdom and repentance, pitiless as a demon. Raguel delivers harsh

judgment. And Gabriel is the messenger of God. I wanted all of you to overcome the darkness you've experienced, and giving you names of beings made of pure light seemed like a good start. Those angels help God to punish the evil on earth and that's what we..." A light cough interrupts her words.

I feel like this is enough for now. She looks pale and I'm physically and mentally exhausted. Also, I feel unreasonably burnt by her decision to let me go. And by Raph's silence... once again.

After making sure she's fine, I walk to the door. My hand is on the doorknob when she adds in a soft voice, "You have been in my thoughts every day, Michael." Her voice cracks, so she clears her throat before continuing. "It was the hardest thing I've ever done, giving you away. I regretted it every single day. Doubts have been eating at me since then. And I still don't know if I made the right call. But seeing you today with Raphael? He cannot love according to ordinary human standards. But he can feel deeply. Like all psychopaths, he wishes to be loved and cared for. But for most, that desire remains unfulfilled, because it is obviously not easy to get close to someone with such different personality characteristics. But you don't mind those, do you?"

No, I don't.

"I've never seen him acting so possessively and protectively toward anybody. It makes me think that maybe this is how it had to happen," Meg finishes in a low murmur.

Tears fill my eyes, and this time, I cannot stop them.

"I'm sorry," she adds, her voice as soft as butterflies' wings.

"I know," I whisper back on my way out of the room, not caring if she heard me or not.



TWO

Project: Blood Assassins

Subject: Two

Day 735

Time 18.35

Two days have passed since Subject One's elimination, and Subject Two is still not eating or sleeping. Violent reactions have increased exponentially. This morning, a nurse was injured badly with a brick to the head when he walked too close to Two. At lunch time, Two stuck a fork into an assistant's hand and bit his ear off before Two was tasered and subdued.

The violence and callousness are precisely what we are attempting to achieve with the subjects. But they need to be controlled and channeled.

More drastic methods don't seem to work on Two. The Subject's pain tolerance has always been higher than average. Nevertheless, it seems it's now reached complete numbness.

All Two does is sit on the floor staring at the camera in the cell. The Subject has been answering any question with a single word: one. Two's obsession with Subject One is disappointing, but a clear trait of a psychopathic disorder. It needs to be aimed at something different.

We'll be leaving the compound tomorrow and moving to a different location. Mr. Crowley hasn't come back since he left with Subject One. We could be compromised and need to transfer the subjects ASAP.

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Chapter 12

RAPHAEL

The silence in the car feels heavy. Michael is staring out of the window, head turned away from me. Even though I cannot see his face, I know his eyes are red from crying. And I'm aware of the reason.

Meg's text '*It's done*' said it all.

He knows about his past, but he's still here.

He is actually here with me. Thoughts of One—Michael—have crossed my mind for twenty long damn years. And I've been pushing them... *him* out of my head repeatedly. Because I felt overcome by rage and grief. Ghosts of the past should remain there. In the past. But he's not a fucking ghost! He never was. He's one of us.

Sharing Michael with anyone, even my family, hasn't been easy. I felt an angry possessive surge when he interacted with them. But the way he stood his ground at dinner, without taking shit from anybody—not even me—showed me how well he fits with us. And turned me the fuck on.

I didn't plan to fuck him in my old room, but damn it to hell, that had been the hottest encounter of my life. And I needed it. Needed to destroy the walls he built all around himself. To erase the space he put between us. I didn't fucking like that space. I want Michael close, tied to me so tightly he'll forget which parts are him and which are me. I want to show him without a doubt that he belongs to me. He has since we were ten, and I didn't even know what sex and claiming meant.

The cool evening breeze ruffles Michael's hair from the half-open window. He doesn't make a move to fix it.

When I found him after ending my work call, he looked upset and even more distant. Ready to burn down the world, I asked him whose head I needed to tear off. But Michael only wanted to go home. So we went straight to the garage, where I grabbed the keys to Linda's Tesla. I wanted my eyes on him, and I wouldn't have been able to do that while riding my Ducati. He climbed inside the car without a single word.

He still feels distant. His white-knuckled fingers squeezing my hand are the only thing stopping me from going full *caveman* on his ass at the moment.

I'm afraid. And I fucking hate the feeling. Although I've never been really afraid of anything before—not even as a kid—I can easily recognize the symptoms. Accelerated pulse, increased respiration and transpiration, irrational thoughts—like Michael leaving me. It all angers me, a feeling I know too well. Losing him again... it's not fucking acceptable. It'd be like watching all my future donors slipping through my fingers. Untouched. I'd go berserk.

I throw a glance his way again. His body is stiff. I can almost hear the million thoughts crowding his head. The soft whimpers occasionally leaving his lips make me see red.

I'm out of my depth here. I have no idea what to do. I'm a manipulative narcissist. It's only me I've ever been interested in. I observe other people to gather and file information until I can use them for myself. And with Michael, I did the same.

I've watched and learned many aspects of him and his life in the last few days. But for the first time, I did it with no agenda, even enjoyed the process. Got addicted to it. It became a need I had to fulfill, knowing everything about him. But I can't think of anything that can help me to stop his gloomy mood right now.

I finally turn onto my street. I stop the car in front of my apartment building, where the valet is waiting to take it to the garage. Rounding the hood, I stop him from opening Michael's door, because I want to do it. When he climbs out, he turns his confused gaze to me. "Where are we?"

"Home," I just tell him and, taking hold of his hand, I pull him through the building doors and toward the shiny elevator.

He looks a little bit like himself again, gazing avidly around. Taking every detail of the free-of-excess, modern black and white lobby. I wave at the doorman and enter my code inside the elevator. We quickly ascend to the penthouse. The metal door slides open directly inside my apartment.

"Lights." The yellow illumination in the spacious living room turns on. I hear a gasp leave Michael's lips, and when I look at him, his mouth is open and his eyes are wide.

"What is it?" I ask him, cupping his cheek.

His lips move up and down before he just utters a 'wow.' His gaze is shifting around the room, from the straight lines of the minimalist design to the sophisticated appliances and luxurious furnishings. The room is an open floor plan, a big stainless-steel kitchen with a large counter is at the back. A

huge cobalt sofa sits in front of a mega screen TV hanging over the modern fireplace. It's pretty bare except for the two paintings placed on the only cerulean wall, the square coffee table near the couch, and the varnished sideboard in the entrance.

"You like the color blue," he finally utters. "Your room at Meg's had different shades of the same color."

I look into his cornflower eyes, knowing that, although I tried, I was never able to find that same variegated, disarmingly beautiful shade. Because it shifts every time his mood changes. Such vivid, mercurial eyes. They can go from stormy ocean blue to light turquoise to almost sky blue.

Surrounding myself with blue was a way to still feel him near me.

Instead of giving him an answer, I let go of his cheek and ask him if he's thirsty.

He shakes his head, moving toward the wall of windows. At this height, we can see Lake Michigan and the city skyline. The people on the street are nothing more than speckles scrambling on the black and grey asphalt. The view usually enchanted people, but Michael's attention is focused on the two red paintings looking even more stark against the blue wall.

He keeps staring, almost hypnotized, his shoulders rising and falling. "The crimson color of the paint. The way it's splattered across the pale canvas..."

He lifts his hand, fingers outstretched, wanting to touch but stopping just shy. I grab them and guide them to the painting. There's no glass, and when his fingertips touch the red, they twitch against mine.

"Blood," I whisper low and slowly in his ear, pushing my back against his chest. I relish the shiver that rolls from his arm down his whole body.

"Yours?" Another light shudder hits him, letting me know how much he likes that idea.

“No.” It’s the blood from my first and only revenge kill.

“It’s...” He shivers again.

“Obscenely beautiful in its darkness.” I kiss the skin under his ear. But instead of melting against me, he drops his hand and pulls away. When he turns to face me, the sorrow in his eyes almost guts me. I don’t like to see him like this. Don’t like to guess why. Nor the fear that’s quickly growing inside me again.

“I can give you whatever you want, Michael. But don’t ask me to let you go. That, I’ll never do.” I fist my hands, trying to control the irrational emotion.

“What I want is for you to explain to me why, Raph. Why didn’t you tell me you knew me?”

He wants answers. I can give him that.

“I thought you were dead.”

“W-what?” he stuttered.

“You don’t remember any of it, do you?” I look into his open eyes, the same eyes that have been haunting me all this time. “Me. You don’t remember me.”

He hesitates for a brief second, but then shakes his head, tightening his lips. I knew that already, but it still hurts to think his brain decided to erase me so easily.

“I was taken when I was six. My foster family sold me to those two fucked-up scientists after I burned their garden shed.”

“What?” he chokes out.

I smirk. “There was a wasp’s nest under the shed roof. Spraying gasoline and then setting it on fire seemed like an effective way to get rid of it for nine-year-old me.” I don’t add that my foster parents kept drugs and other

illegal substances in that same shed, because I didn't burn it down led by some kind of stupid virtuous principle. I just wanted to get back at them for being callous bastards.

"They sold you?"

I nod. I hadn't been surprised by that. They were shitheads. "For the next three years, those scientists experimented on me."

"What... what did they do to you?" His lower lip trembles, but his shoulders are set into a determined pose.

"They forced me to watch what the majority of people would call disturbing images for hours every day. Made me endure pain, lack of sleep, no food or water. Tortured me with endless high-pitched sounds and a too hot or cold environment. And more; much more. I could hear other kids crying, begging, or talking through the bars of my room. But I never met any of them until they brought you to me. From the first moment I saw you...that first glance I knew you were mine."

Michael opens his mouth, but my thumb pushing firmly on his lips shushes him.

"It's the truth. You were all big blue eyes and dirty blond hair. Trembling and pushing your body against the wall, trying to make yourself as tiny as you could. Your fear turned on all my predatory senses, and I felt fully drawn to you." I still remember the thrilling sensation of having him there with me for the first time. My finger starts stroking his lower plump lip.

"My deep curiosity turned into something else, something deeper when you gave me your blanket after I was hosed for an hour with freezing water. I thought I was going to die. Couldn't feel any part of my body, not even my tongue. You gave me your pink piggy and hugged me until I stopped shivering."

“Pink piggy?”

“A small stuffed toy you kept hidden inside a hole in the wall. It was the only thing they didn’t take away from you.” I feel myself smiling, remembering the worn, dirty toy, and how One used to squeeze it to his chest.

“So we became friends?” he tentatively asks.

‘Friends’ sounds too plain... insufficient. There’s no word to describe all that we were to each other. The soul-touching connection that bonded us together. But I nod at him. Words are not enough; I’ll show him after we’re done talking. With my mouth, my tongue, my fingers, and my cock, until his body and mind are full of me and only me.

“Why did you think I was dead?” He leans closer.

Even though I don’t want to remember that day, I told Michael I’d give him anything. “You put yourself in front of me when one of the sadistic nurses was having his fun beating me up. You hit your head on the floor, hard.” I swallow, closing my eyes, but his unmoving body is right in front of me again. So small and defenseless.

The feel of his warm fingers lacing through mine pushes my eyes open. “I’m here,” he whispers, only a few inches from me. His eyes are filled with tears. I let my forehead fall onto his and take a big breath. His spicy scent is like a soothing balm. “There was blood everywhere. And I thought he killed you.”

“I was tasered in the chest.” Michael strokes a hand between his pecs, frowning like he can still feel an echo of the pain.

“Yes. How...?” I pull my head back to better look at his face.

“I’ve been having dreams. I think they’re fractured memories from those years. Like my dissociated brain is letting some pieces slip.” He swallows

hard. "I saw the piggy with one button, a dark room and other odd images. And bright, green eyes. Your eyes. I keep dreaming about your hand holding mine. It... comforts me. Makes me feel safe." He softly brushes a finger on my cheek.

He's remembering me.

"I promised to protect you," I growl.

"I didn't need to be protected. I needed to be found. And you did."

"Michael, I can't lose you again. When it happened, I turned maniacal. When Meg found us, I was... I don't know why she didn't give up on me. I had to suppress your memory to function again. But you were always there. Like a lost arm I still felt, even though it was gone. And then I saw you sitting in that booth. Smiling at Meg. Laughing heartily at something she said. I recognized you straight away." I grunt, remembering how it felt like a dream.

"After all these years," he breathes out.

"I wanted to cross that street, grab you and take you away. But I was so damn angry at Meg, and Rague was with me. So, I followed you. You were more beautiful than I remembered, and still mine. Even though you didn't recognize me. My One."

Michael gasps when he hears the number. And I drink that sound with a slow, hungry, possessive kiss. When we part, he's panting. His cheeks are red, lips shiny and eyes closed. All I want is to take off his clothes and fuck him raw and fast against the window, for the whole of Chicago to see. But we're not done yet.

"That's why there was tension between you and Meg at dinner. You didn't know I was alive."

I grit my teeth. “She kept you away from me, Linda as well. For twenty years. They knew I thought you were dead. When I went to talk to Meg, I left before she finished explaining. I was too fucking furious.”

“I’m angry as well,” he confesses.

“You are?”

“I was the only one left out. Meg explained to me why, but I can’t stop feeling abandoned.” His voice is soft, and it breaks at the end.

“If I’d known you were out there, I’d have come and snatched you in a heartbeat, babe. Fuck everything else.” I tighten my grip on his head. “But you did good. So good by yourself.”

“Good?” He abruptly yanks himself away from me. With both his hands, he grabs fistfuls of his hair and pulls, shaking his head frantically.

“I’m not fucking good, Raph!” His eyes are wild. His lips have formed a straight line.

“Yes, you are. You found a way to overcome your trauma better than all of us.”

His bitter laugh bounces off the wall. “You mean my fuck-up brain decided to push all my memories under a rug, while I was taken away from the only person I’ve ever had a connection with?”

“Michael, you don’t know what fucked up means,” I growl.

“Are you talking about the fact that you’re a psychopath?” he suddenly says. There’s no fear, nor disgust in his tone.

“Meg?”

“She just confirmed my suspicions, I mean, your behavior at times is quite puzzling.” A half-smirk tilts his lips for a second. “I don’t care, by the way.” Of course he doesn’t. He’s mine.

“It’s not only me. My brothers aren’t psychopaths, but they are affected by other disorders related to what the scientists did to us, and not.” If he asks me what’s *wrong* with them, I’ll tell him. But he doesn’t.

He starts pacing. “Being a psychopath, or whatever else your brothers are, doesn’t mean you are fucked up! And I’m not normal either! Fuck, I hate that word.”

“You still don’t need to do what we...” I let the words die, even though I want to tell him everything. But seeing the crazy look in his eyes, the shudders shaking his body, I know it’d be too much.

“What you...?” he repeats.

But I shake my head.

“Fuck!” he chokes out. “Look!” He yanks his leather jacket off and then pulls my shirt off himself in an angry movement, throwing it somewhere on the floor.

My eyes quickly land on the soft hair covering his pecs. But then his arms catch my attention. Because they are covered in scars. Long, short, horizontal, vertical scars. Mostly small ones, but there’re a few big ones around his biceps.

I’m on him in his next breath, grabbing his hands and turning his arms to inspect more of his skin. There are more wounds.

“Who the fuck did this to you?” I hiss menacingly, already enjoying the pleasure I’m going to feel disemboweling the faceless dead-fucker-walking. A drop of water lands suddenly on his forearm. Then another one. When I look up, there are tears rolling down his cheeks. His capricious eyes are as light and clean as waterfalls, and filled with agonizing pain. If I had any empathy in me, the sight of his red face and his helpless gaze would have

killed me on the spot. I can't erase the pain inflicted, but I can get him revenge. And repay the same pain ten-thousand times over on the fucker.

I grab his wet face with both hands and, looking straight into his eyes, order him sternly, "Tell me his name."

The tears seem to double in his eyes before Michael softly breathes out, "Me."

Shock rolls inside me and I freeze.

"I-I did this to-to myself," he hiccups.

"Why?" My fingers start stroking the uneven lines on his skin. They are all old. Years, months. There are no new ones.

"It's the blood. I-I need the blood. Inside of me, there's a h-hole that craves the sight of it. And m-more. That's why I'm a coroner and a hematologist. Because I need to see, to touch, to feel it. It soothes and... excites me at the same time."

His eyes are looking down, but the tears are still falling profusely. "My p-parents saw something was wrong with me. My obsession with gory movies, horror books, and visits to the emergency room just to get a peek at open wounds alarmed them. They made me promise to stop following my inner... inner monster." He squeaks the last word. "But I just couldn't. So, I started... cutting myself. As sweet punishment. A painful reminder of why my bloody cravings were wrong. And years later I found a job that filled my inner need without the risk of revealing it to anybody."

If it was anyone else, this confession would be a mega-cringeworthy, nails-on-a-chalkboard moment. I'm that unfeeling. But with Michael, everything matters. And nobody can hurt him, not even himself. Unfortunately, his parents are dead already. Otherwise, I'd have pay them a visit to show them

the color of the ignorant, prejudiced, bitter blood running in their fucking black hearts.

“And it’s getting worse. I’ve never tasted anybody else’s blood before you.”

He breaks down in convulsing gasps, his sobs are filled with despair.

I let go of his hands and head toward the sideboard. Crouching down on the polished wooden floor, I push a hidden button on the side and watch the dark brown door slide open. Inside, my knife collection salutes me. It’s neatly arranged, not by sharpness or size, but by effectiveness and deadly precision. I grab the last one, a Damascus hunting knife I had custom made. It’s a small, five-inch blade, never used. The handle is made of light blue turquoise. I unsheathe the short, vicious dagger and walk back to Michael. He’s still standing where I left him. Head down, arms around his shaking body.

“Look at me,” I order. When his eyes finally lift, I take off my shirt and turn the knife toward my left arm, quickly making a cut on my forearm.

Michael’s sucking breath is loud inside the silent room. “No!” he screams, stretching his hands toward the bloody wound. But I move my arm away, smirking at his horrified expression.

“If you want to make it better, you need to kiss it better, babe,” I rumble. He licks his lips, staring at the small drops of blood rolling down my arm and hitting the polished wooden floor. But he doesn’t make a move. He shakes his head. His gaze shifts up again, eyes large in his pale face.

“This knife’s steel artwork is unique. The blade has a wavy, mottled pattern that runs through it.” I place the flat on my forearm again to show him the intricate design. “To some, the pattern on the steel looks like an imperfection. To me, it’s a thing of beauty,” I tell him, staring at his arms.

His hands go automatically to cover the multiple lines marring his skin.

But as he whimpers, he takes a step toward me when I moan a '*fuck yes*' at the feel of the blade slicing my forearm again.

"And it's getting better, not worse. You and me together could never be bad, babe," I tell him.

His eyes jump to mine, and I point the knife at my bicep. But he grabs my hand before I can make another shallow cut. He brings my fist, still holding the blade, down to my side, and with the other hand, he lifts my injured arm.

His head comes down, and then his warm tongue is on my skin, lapping at my blood. My dick starts pulsing inside my jeans, insistently demanding some action. When his lips close and suck hard, I growl and grab his head, pulling it up. His mouth is smeared with my blood, eyes still watery, cheeks flushed. He's a vision.

"I'm a monster," he whispers brokenly.

I give him my best cold-blooded smile. "You have no idea what a monster is, piglet." I see a brief fire burn in his eyes, but it fades quickly.

I tighten my fist in his hair and yank his mouth against mine. It's a feral kiss. The taste of my blood on his tongue drives me almost fucking insane. I tuck the knife in my back pocket and, grabbing a handful of his ass, lift him up in my arms, swallowing his sound of surprise into my mouth. Without halting the kiss, I walk straight to my bedroom. Fucking against the window will have to be postponed until next time.

I put him down, toss the knife on the bed near the pillow, and then order him to strip while I do the same. When he's done, Michael crawls on the bed, giving me for a too-brief, very smutty vision of his round ass. Then he turns belly up and lays down, legs open, hard cock pointing at the almost

white hair peppering his pecs. His skin is so pale, his green veins create a blood road map all over his body. It's so damn hot.

He is lithe but fit, with some definition. The tempting V of his lower abdomen points downward, drawing my gaze to his pink, hard length again. He calls my name. His heavy-lidded eyes are begging me to join him and fuck him into the mattress. That's how I like him. Horny for me.

I grab my cock and, after slicking the length with some precum, start giving it slow, hard pumps. "I see you in all your bloody beauty, babe." My eyes are eating every soft and hard line of him.

"You really see me, don't you?" he asks in a timid voice.

"You're a vision, Michael." My knee sinks into the bed. Then the other follows. And I slide on top of him like a predator, holding my weight on my elbows. "I prefer seeing you with my cock buried all the way inside your ass. But under me? Ready to be taken? It's damn sweet too."

He lets out a long, shuddering breath, and a shadow of a smile appears on his lips. I turn my head and start leaving light nips and long licks over the cuts on his arms. They are part of him, therefore mine as well. The feel of hands touching me usually annoys the hell out of me. But Michael's fingers running through my hair, tightening around my locks and scratching my scalp? I don't know how I ever existed without them.

I grab the knife near the pillow and hand it to him. "Cut me," I command him. "I want the same marks you bear on my arms. I want to make them mine."

"You-you can't do that. Can't... take them away." His eyes turn glassy.

"I don't want to take them away. I want to share them with you," I correct him.

He still doesn't take the knife.

“You’ve suppressed a part of yourself. And it turned against you.” I stroke one of the scars lightly, feeling him shivering under me. “You should have embraced it. Accepted it. Like I do. Let go, Michael. You’re fucking beautiful. Do what we both want. Cut me, babe!”

He looks deeply inside my eyes before gripping the knife with a trembling hand. He slowly turns the blade to my right bicep.

“A little lower,” I instruct him, wanting the wound to be in the exact same spot as his. His shiny blond head tilts slightly to the left before I feel the blade hesitantly sink in. “Attaboy,” I groan in pleasure. “That’s it. So fucking good.”

The cut is not as deep as the others I made, but it takes him longer. And the slow aching sting makes me hiss with desire. As soon as he lifts the knife, his tongue goes in its place. The moan escaping his lips turns my balls into heavy, boiling vessels ready to shoot. And when he sucks, the sensations coursing through me... it can only be described as raw pleasure. I always had a penchant for pain, but never thought I’d enjoy it in the bedroom. The way Michael is giving it to me though? It’s making my cock drip like a broken faucet.

While he keeps mouthing my wound, I push his legs wider, spit on my finger and lower them. I stroke some saliva over the puckered rim, and then force a digit all the way in.

“Ahhh!” he screams, dropping his head on the pillow. His upper teeth dig into his red lip. “More. Give me more,” he whispers thickly.

I push myself back on my knees. Lifting his bent legs up and opening my mouth, I let spit fall on the crack of his ass. It’s obscenely satisfying to see it roll down and disappear under him. I gather it and push another finger inside his tight warmth.

He moans loudly and arches up from the bed. The knife falls from his hand and rolls on the floor. My fingers are pumping ruthlessly inside him when I growl, looming over him, “Now, let me hear how much you like taking my fingers up your ass, when it’s already full of my cum.”

“So much. Shit! Please.” Seeing him sweating and twisting under me, screaming in bliss, takes me to the point of no return. I pull out my fingers and roll him around.

“Hands and knees. Open those cheeks for me. Show me what’s mine.” Pushing his forehead against the bed, he follows my instructions eagerly. I take a moment to admire the pink entrance I plan to ruin... eventually. “Keep them open. I want to see our bodies become one when my cock sinks inside you.”

I spit some more on my already dripping cock and smear the fluids all over it before lining it up at his entrance. With a powerful thrust, I push through the ring, half-way inside. He whimpers but widens his knees, pushing his cheeks more apart. I pull back before ramming all eight inches of raw, hard dick inside him.

He cries and moans, “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” His blunt nails dig into his skin. I grab his waist to hold my cock deep as he tentatively works his hips in circles.

There’s no resistance, only a demand for more. And all my red cells are rapidly set on fire. I’m fucking high having him, defenseless and willing under me. Taking every slam of my cock like a perfect slut. His cries turn downright filthy, and I’m addicted to every single sound he utters. Mindlessly encouraging me to fuck him harder, deeper.

The feel of his wet, hot, suctioning channel taking my whole dick, clenching around it, makes my eyes cross. Desire overwhelms me and I turn

into a mindless animal chasing his own pleasure. I grab Michael's hair and lift his head from the mattress, pumping wildly inside his ass. My other hand takes hold of his shoulder to pull his body roughly against my hips every time I piston forward.

"Raph," he yells my name, his voice raw.

I feel the urge to mark his skin. Claim him, with bites and bruises that will make him moan louder. I drop down on him, placing a hand on the sheets. His fingers let go of his asscheeks. But before I can let him know my displeasure, he begins to respond to each one of my thrusts with a hard and fast bucking of his hips, fucking himself frantically on my cock.

I tilt his head to the side to expose his neck to me.

"Yes," he whimpers, licking his lips. His hand finds mine on top of the sheets and he laces our fingers together, just before my teeth sink deeply in his soft flesh. As soon as I taste blood, I suck it hard into my mouth, relishing his moans. Michael is impaling himself wildly on my cock. My balls slapping against his ass.

"Your belly is full of my blood. Your ass of my cum," I growl near his ear.

"And you're working my cock for another load. You belong to me, Michael."

"Raph." His blue eyes find mine. "I-I love you," he chokes out. Hearing him saying those words opens something inside me. Something I kept locked since the day they tore him from me.

I crush my lips to his, exchanging open-mouthed, wild kisses. Michael meets me at every turn, his tongue sparring with mine.

I've never felt this needed or craved by anyone. And I'm forever hooked on it.

“Make me come, babe. Keep working that tight ass around me,” I snarl at him, feeling my cock throb inside his wet warmth.

I let go of his hair and grab his shaft, beating him with purpose. He lets out a long cry, and then I feel his cum dripping on my fingers—his hole is doing its best to milk me. And damn, I give it one, two, three hard thrusts before it sucks all the jizz out of my balls. I roar and bite his shoulder, groaning on his skin, leaving only a bruise this time. My hips keep jerking, cum spurting out, fingers holding painfully tight on his hand and ecstasy flooding my veins.

I drop my head on the pillow near his head, and all my weight on him, enjoying the feel of his smaller body under mine for a few seconds before trying to shift. But Michael’s hand on my thigh stops me.

“Stay,” he sighs. I relax back against him, turn my nose in his hair, and breathe deeply. After a minute, my cock is turning soft, and I feel cum dripping on my balls. As I pull out of him and move on my side, a moan escapes him when more cum leaks out. I smirk and push it back inside him where it belongs with two fingers.

His satisfied, sinful grin brings a foreign flush of pleasure through my chest. And I find myself content to simply drink in the sight of him. Still prone and gloriously naked, legs spread and back glistening with sweat, with my fingers lazily pumping between his cheeks. The swell of his ass jiggles every time my knuckles go deep, and I slide down and give it a hard, unforgiving bite before going back to my pillow.

“You savage!” Michael chides, but he’s looking at me with what I can only read as adoration.

His fingers rub against the scars marring my chest—the oldest caused by the years in captivity, the newest by some sneaky donor. His touch is light

and soothing.

“We need to disinfect your cuts,” he says.

“Later,” I breathe out, letting our heavy breaths lull me to sleep.

“You all got branded because of me, didn’t you?” Michael suddenly says, making my shuttering eyes slide open.

His gaze is on the red number two on my inner wrist.

“Because I escaped,” he adds.

“Your escape just expedited the inevitable.”

“Still... I should have been branded too.” He sighs.

“Is that guilt I hear? Because that’s the most useless emotion people feel. Especially for events or behavior outside of your control. And we all endured much worse than a burn, trust me.”

“Is it wrong of me to feel disappointed about not been branded?” he asks after a while, looking down at my chest. “I don’t remember almost anything about the horror we experienced. And instead of feeling relieved about it—and about being adopted and having an ordinary-ish life—I’m upset. I’m pissed at losing years with you. All of you. Years I spent not understanding a part of myself. Alone. All my life I’ve felt out of place.”

“Your place is with me. Always has been.” I pin him with a firm stare.

“I meant it... before,” he whispers hoarsely.

“That you like to be filled with my cum?” I thrust my fingers harder in the drenched hole, and he cries. “I know, piglet.”

“No. I mean, yes, I like everything you do to me.” He huffs, pushing my hand away and sitting on the bed. “But I’m talking about the fact that...” He takes a big breath. “I love you.”

“I know.” I copy his body posture. “I’m a psychopath, but I know what love is—a deep caring for the existence of another. A feeling of strong affection

toward a person who is the object of romantic thoughts,” I recite drily, as I remember reading it on Wiktionary. He swallows and nods at me before turning his face away to stare at the bed sheets.

I stand up and go to the wardrobe. From the highest shelf, I retrieve a worn black box and carry it to the bed. I sit next to Michael again and place the box on the opposite side. My fingers grab the lid. The color there has faded, ruined by excessive use.

“Love is not for me. Because what I feel for you is damn consuming. A wild inferno. Endless obsession, laced with darkly possessive, bloody, claiming thoughts, which easily turn into eviscerating murderous images at the idea of losing you.” I put all the conviction I can master in my every word. Then I open the box and take out the shabby, patched stuffed animal.

Michael gasps with shock. One hand covers his mouth, while the other comes toward the little pink piggy in my palm. His fingers lightly brush one tiny trotter before jerking back, almost as if burned.

“So it’s true. All of it.” A watery smile appears on his face. “I knew it was already. It just, it feels so distant. Like it happened in another life...” His words trail off.

His hand curls around the piggy and he stares at it for a long time, stroking gently over the missing eyes, round ratty nose, and what’s left of the green button.

“You’ve always been my piglet.” I tell him.

Michael suddenly jumps on me. His arms hook strongly behind my neck, his legs wrapping around my waist like a vise.

“I love you so much, Raphael Bear-Stone,” he says, laughing happily into my ear while more tears splash on my neck. My chest feels tight, and a

strange buzzing sensation runs through my veins. He giggles. “God, your name is a lot. Just like you.”

“You better get used to it.” Since we’ll share that as well one day.

I pull back and devour his mouth, enjoying his taste on my tongue. My dick agrees, getting half-hard again.

Holding him against my body, I slide down the mattress and walk toward the living room again. My fingers brushing between his cheeks make him moan against my neck, his shaft growing against my belly.

“My insatiable, piglet.”

He bites my lip hard in retaliation.

Time to fuck him against that window.

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Chapter 13

RAPHAEL

When we walk through the milk-white doors of Bear-Stone Labs three days later, Michael can barely stifle his excitement. His fingers keep squeezing mine, eyes flickering around, feet halting every few steps to better assess his surroundings. He smiles widely at the two receptionists behind the glass desks, while I aim a light nod in their direction. Sandy, my assistant, appears a moment later.

“Morning, Boss. Dr. Caldwell.” He greets Michael using his professional voice. “I’m Sandy, Mr. Bear-Stone’s assistant.”

“It’s a pleasure. And please, call me Michael.” My boyfriend smiles enthusiastically at Sandy. Looking positively surprised by my colorful assistant, with his hot-pink hair, coral nail polish, and flamingo high heels.

“Must be such a thrill to work here.”

“It sure is.” Sandy’s lifted eyebrow is full of sarcasm. He’s been my PA for a year now. I didn’t choose him for his credentials—he had very few to

speak of—but he was the only one among the other candidates who didn't flirt or avert his eyes in my presence. His fearless attitude was refreshing.

"Although working directly under the big boss must be... challenging," Michael stage whispers, faking a shudder.

"Challenging is definitely a word for it." He winks at Michael.

"You love being under me, babe. You screamed it multiple times yesterday —" Michael pushes his hand over my mouth, ending my sentence. His face is red, embarrassment filling his eyes. I don't understand why. He should feel deeply satisfied, and a bit sore, after how many times I fucked him yesterday... and this morning.

"We're at work, Raphael!" he chides me. I nip his palm before he removes his hand.

"Nobody heard. And Sandy is a tomb." I wave at my unblinking assistant. He's heard much worse from me and my brothers, since we've never been very secretive about past encounters in front of him.

"Not the point. That's private," he hisses.

"What's private?" I hear Rami's voice coming from behind us.

"Fuck me," Michael mumbles.

"Kinky! I thought you and Raph were exclusive, but..."

I don't let Rami finish.

"Touch him and you are dead." I stare at my foster brother with homicidal intent going around my head.

"And they say love makes people mellow," Rami mutters.

"Raph? Mellow?" Michael asks teasingly.

Sandy snorts, but quickly clears his voice. "Dr... Michael, here is your all-day pass for the labs and the rest of the building. I'm going to get lunch. What would you like to eat?"

“Oh, whatever Raph eats is fine.”

“Don’t choose fish, Michael doesn't like it much. And buy some fruit desserts as well,” I tell Sandy, earning a soft smile from my boyfriend. I’ll use that feeling of gratitude to my advantage when Michael is next on his knees, gasping for air.

“Make it three of everything, Sandy-Bell.” Rami winks at him, getting nothing from my assistant in return, per usual.

“Bring them to Sari’s lab,” I instruct Sandy before he tells me there’s some documents that need to be signed on my desk.

“That Sandy-Bell is a hard nut to crack.” Rami sighs as my assistant leaves.

“He just doesn’t like you,” I tell him, tugging Michael toward my office.

“I’ll see you in Sari’s lab. Remember to wash your hands,” the fucker screams behind us.

We pass a couple of conference rooms before reaching Sandy’s empty station outside my door. We enter the office and I close it behind us, pulling Michael toward my desk. With a flip of my wrist, I spin him around, always enjoying his predictable gasps of surprise, and push his ass on the edge of the cold surface.

I crowd him, slotting my body between his open legs and planting my hands on either side of his body.

“I dreamed of fucking you on this desk.” I smirk at his red cheeks. “You, naked, sprawled on it, hands holding your bent legs high and wide apart while I’m drilling your ass until it’s drenched with my cum.”

My hand leaves the desk to stroke my thumb against his lip.

“But first, I need to feel my cock inside your throat,” I growl.

“Raph...”

My kiss swallows his words, and I'm about to unzip my pants, when Michael's hand against my chest stops me.

"I want you so much, but we came here to see your brother in action," he breathes on my lips. I nip hard on his lower one, feeling my dick turning into stone after Michael moans.

Fuck! I'm not used to fulfilling someone else's desires, and not mine. And right now, mine is having Michael's lips wrapped around my aching dick. Nevertheless, I sigh and yank out my phone from my pants to call Sari.

Michael's happy smile mitigates my frustration a little. He kisses my jaw and lets out an excited laugh.

"Sari." I try to hide the irritation in my voice when he picks up. I've always been softer toward him. Maybe because his fragility and light blue eyes remind me of Michael's.

Uri's voice comes out of the other line instead. "Where the fuck are you guys? I hate coming here."

"Then you shouldn't have come." I wish I was coming down Michael's throat.

Michael gesture for me to go, and I point to the papers on the other side of the desk, the ones I need to sign.

Uri mumbles something that sounds like '*I don't have a choice*' in my ear. The way he needs to protect Sari makes perfect sense to me. Because I feel the same toward Michael. Multiplied by a thousand.

"Hurry up!" Uri barks.

I end the call with a grunt, and, after a brief read, sign the documents.

"Let's go see your brother, and after lunch I'll let you have your wicked way with me." Michael rounds the desk and kisses me on the cheek.

“You don’t let me have anything. I’ll take what’s mine, anytime I want.” I grab his nape and press my lips against his forehead.

“Caveman.”

“And all yours. Aren’t you lucky?” I say before turning him around and guiding him toward the elevators again.

He grins at me. “Yes. Yes, I am.” This time, my lips fall on his mouth, giving the receptionists a quick, dirty sight before the sliding silver doors close.

The elevator dings, ending our kiss. I step back to admire my work. Michael looks wrecked, with his hair disheveled and lips swollen and red. Those same lips curve into a sweet smile as the doors slowly open. He’s damn beautiful and here, with me.

Michael fixes his hair, passing his fingers through it a couple of times before we get off the elevator.

The lab is on the thirtieth floor. When we step inside, Sari is surrounded by eager students in white coats. He looks in his element, talking about his work. Uri is leaning against one of the long desks, glaring.

“Who’s the guy eating Sari up with his eyes?” Michael whispers, tilting his head toward a clean-cut man standing a little further back.

“Judging by the tweed jacket and vest, a professor from UIC,” Rami replies.

“You need to stop sneaking up on people,” Michael complains, spearing him with an annoyed look.

Rami just shrugs. “The little minions have no intention of leaving.” He points to the hypnotized students listening to every single word Sari is saying.

“Of course not. Dr... Sari is talking about his research on skin regeneration and stem cells.” Michael quickly lets go of my hand and almost jogs to the

group.

“His groupie vibes are scary. Careful Raph, you may have competition.” Rami’s smirk is replaced by an outrageous expression when Uri bumps hard against him.

“Aren’t you ever sick of your own voice?” he asks Rami.

“Aren’t you ever sick of your stupid dreads?” he retorts, throwing a quick glance at Uri’s long, rope-like strands of hair.

“Why are you here?” Uri asks him.

“Can’t I spend some time with my bros?” When we keep staring at him, he looks at me and adds, “Your donor. It has to be tonight.”

“You could have called him.” Uri turns his suspicious eyes on Rami. “Our lines are always secure, thanks to you.”

“What crawled up your ass this time? A Hercules Beetle?” Rami quips.

Already fed up with their banter, I grit my teeth. “I’m busy tonight.”

“Doing?” Rami frowns deeply at me. And I know why. I never pass up a chance at a donor.

“Now the fucker is flirting with your boyfriend as well,” Uri snarls, glaring at the professor talking very closely to Michael, while the students are filing out of the room.

With two steps, I reach Michael, wrap an arm around his waist, and pull his back against my front.

“Oomph.” He lifts his head and turns his confused eyes to me.

“Oh, Mr. Bear-Stone, thank you for letting my students come here today. I’m Professor Clayton from UIC.” The man aims an easy and charming smile at me.

“Always a pleasure to inspire fresh minds.” I turn into my engaging persona while stroking Michael’s skin under his shirt. The professor follows the

movement for a moment before focusing his attention on Sari. Message fucking received.

They talk about a university symposium Sari has been invited to next month, which Michael seems very interested in. Uri interrupts them, announcing Sandy is here with our lunches. Professor Clayton says his goodbyes and leaves.

“Are you done marking your territory?” Rami lifts a brow at me, pushing two chairs near the empty table.

“Let Michael go and come eat,” Uri huffs, annoyed.

“I am starving,” Michael says, lifting his glinting cornflower eyes at me, a small smirk on his lips. I kiss them and let him go, but my hand goes around his nape, guiding him to the table.

“We need to work on your bossy caveman act.”

He can try. I’ll never be less possessive of him.

Sandy sets down four brown paper bags from Cucina, the Italian bistro around the corner, before leaving. Rami is taking the styrofoam containers out and handing them around. The smell of Carbonara and Lasagna quickly permeates the room. There aren’t enough chairs, so I pull Michael on my lap.

He wiggles his delicious ass on my dick, shifting until his legs are both on one side, and then offers me a forkful of pasta. I take it, relaxing back in the chair, with my fingers idly stroking his hip.

“Professor Clayton seemed very interested... in your research,” Rami tells Sari before stuffing his mouth with some pasta.

“Was he?” Uri spits out between gritted teeth.

An oblivious Sari frowns at him before replying, “He wants to talk about it at the symposium next month.”

“I’ll take you,” Uri promptly says.

“We can take Sari, since Michael and I will be going as well,” I say around a mouthful of warm lasagna Michael has just fed me.

“We will?” Michael’s head snaps toward me, his face sparkling with happiness. I nod, earning a quick egg-bacon-flavor, kiss.

“Not at the table, kids,” Rami whines, covering his eyes.

“That’s great!” Sari exclaims, starting to talk about some of the people that will be present at the symposium with Michael.

Uri is brooding dangerously in his chair, glaring at me. His sociopathic mind is surely at work, judging by the way he blindly stabs at the lasagna with a fork. *Suicide Bridge*, I mouth at him, reminding him of the fucking bulbs.

“We have the Brampton Charity for foster kids next month,” Uri reminds me with a smirk, knowing how boring those functions are for me. I’d much prefer to just give the charity the money, rather than spend time with entitled pricks.

“It’s on the fifteenth,” I say, flipping him the bird behind Michael’s back.

“The symposium is a week later. Which reminds me that I need to tell Sandy to buy a ticket for you to the charity event,” I tell Michael.

“What?” Michael shouts, quickly covering his lasagna-filled mouth with his hand. “I can’t come!”

“Why not?” I ask him. The table falls oddly silent.

“I... I’m not good with...people,” he whispers.

“He means living people, since he’s terrific with corpses,” Rami annoyingly cuts in. “Mike, can you raise your voice? It’s hard to eavesdrop from here.”

Ignoring my brother, I focus on Michael. “I want you there.”

“Why?” His eyes are flickering between mine, searching. He still doesn’t get it.

“To show my boyfriend off, babe.” I cup his cheek. “To let people know you’re mine.”

His long exhale of breath is soon followed by a shy smile. But he’s got a point. We should test the waters first.

“Okay,” he softly voices.

“You’re so cute,” Sari almost coos at us.

“Puke inducing.” Rami rolls his eyes.

Michael gives him the bird, turning to our empty containers to close the lids before placing them in one of the paper bags.

“I’ve checked the Rope Killer police files and the last murder doesn’t feel right,” Uri abruptly mutters, not lifting his eyes from his plate.

“The victim was a therapist.” Sari nods. “He was found in his office.”

“But not killed there. His body was moved,” Michael says.

“For sure. He lost a lot of blood from his nose, but there was none on the carpeted floor where the body was found,” Rami adds.

“He experienced a severe nose hemorrhage because of his hemophilia,” Michael explains.

“His shirt and pants were covered in blood.” I saw it in the forensic pictures of the crime scene attached to the police files. The absence of blood on the floor is proof of what Michael said: the body was moved.

“But the other four victims weren’t.” Uri says.

“No,” Rami replies.

“It was a crime of passion, then.” Uri claps his hands, making Michael jump at the sound.

“You mean that it was committed out of anger or fear? Not premeditated?” Michael asks him.

“Exactly.” Uri nods at him. “Something must have happened with the last victim to force the killer to move the body.”

“The victim was older, and moved from the real crime scene, but he had all the other traits the killer looks for in his targets,” Sari offers.

“So, he probably intended to kill him at a later date,” Uri adds.

“Or he just likes to surround himself with people who fit his fantasies,” I throw on the table.

“Like a temptation?”

I nod in response to Michael’s question. His clear eyes are scanning my face. Does he see my dark side? Can he guess what it makes me do?

“Maybe the killer was one of his patients?” Sari suggests. And we all turn to look at him.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” Rami smiles at him. “I’ll check into it.”

“I feel like we are getting closer.” Uri sounds thrilled.

I throw a stern look at him and then to the others. Silently telling them that the Rope Killer is mine. Michael catches our exchange and turns to me with eyes full of questions. Unable to answer him at this very moment, I distract him with some dessert. I know he’s onto me, but the slice of pineapple coconut pie does the trick, for now.

A while later, I’m back in my office checking a few more things, while Michael is still with Sari in the lab.

“I’m wondering what could possibly keep Raph away from his donor tonight.” Rami enters my office, followed by Uri. He sits on the sofa and props his combat-boot-wearing feet on the coffee table.

Uri goes to the window, staring at the city view. The sun's rays play peek-a-boo between the tall skyscrapers.

"Dinner with The Joker? An auction of Jack the Ripper's killing tools?" my foster brother continues.

"Does he make it go away?" Uri's voice comes out soft and uncertain, but it brings a piercing silence to the room.

I know what he's talking about, but Rami asks, "Who?"

"Michael... Did he take away the need inside you?" Uri clarifies without turning around from the window. His posture is relaxed, but I can see the reflection of his haunted eyes in the glass.

The need he's asking about... we all have it. All of us were changed by those years in captivity, by all the torture we endured. And although Linda and Meg raised us the best they could, to reach the best version of ourselves, the darkness those years put inside us remained. I embraced it. Fucking enjoyed giving it the reins at times. But it sounds like Uri is still fighting it.

"No," I reply. "It's still there. But he gives me something else to focus on."

Uri sighs. "I see."

"You want to pass your donor to Rague?" Rami asks me after a minute.

"He's in need of venting."

"Isn't he always?" Uri utters.

"Tell Rague I'll get his next one," I say.

Rami pulls his phone out of his jeans. "Done. So why are you ditching work tonight? What do you have planned?"

"Ditching work?" Michael walks inside the room, stopping near my desk.

Just the sight of him awakes my inner predator. His pale, delicate skin and graceful, lean body invites it out to play and ignites a possessive fire inside

me. My cock starts growing. But it's not only the sex that I want from him. I want to possess every-fucking-thing that is him. To become his constant. The steady thought that never leaves his head. Only at that point will he know a fraction of my obsession for him.

"We have a date to go on tonight," I tell him, leaning on the desk to grab his hand and tug him near me.

"A date?" He sounds positively surprised. I take advantage and pull him on my lap.

"And that's my cue to go." Uri waves on his way out.

"I'll call you guys later." Rami takes a bit longer, smirking at me before closing the door.

"So, where are you taking me?" Michael asks, rubbing his cushy ass right on my half-hard chub.

"Let's start with you bending on the desk and taking my cock. Your performance will decide if you need to know further details."

He tsks. "I did say you could have your wicked way with me."

He gives me a long, slow grind of his hips that is so damn good, it makes me wonder if a ride on my cock sounds better.

"Very wicked."

Smirking confidently, he stands up and starts undoing his jeans. Fuck, I like this self-assured side of him.

When he bends down to take off his shoes, I hook my hands behind my head and relax in the chair.



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Chapter 14

MICHAEL

The sound of Raph's deep, reverberating grunts as he came in his office a few hours back plays on repeat in my mind, leaving me with a throbbing dick and a sore ass as we walk toward the fancy restaurant from the parking lot. With every kiss, bite, and sensual thrust, he claimed another piece of me. Soon, there'll be nothing left. I'll be utterly and hopelessly his.

I glance at him. He looks so damn hot wearing a black Henley, the buttons open, showing his smooth skin. A few chest hairs are peeking out as well; they make me want to slide under the fabric and rub myself all over him. A pair of tight, worn grey jeans wrap his solid legs like a second skin and his muscular arms are covered by a brown leather jacket—he owns at least twenty and treats them like his babies.

Tonight, his ass looks illegal. My boyfriend is head-turning-sexy, and it's not because of what he's wearing. He just oozes seductively commanding vibes that are urging me to drag him back to the car and ride him like

there's no tomorrow, just to remind him who he belongs to. It looks like that caveman shit is rubbing off on me.

To distract myself from my dirty thoughts, I push my mind to the phone call we received from Rami earlier. He told us that he found a connection between the gun used in the attempted robbery at the convenience store and one of my deceased patients. Mr. Coleman, the elderly man who died at Grand View more than a week ago.

The gun was reported stolen by Ms. Scalini. She told the police that she always kept it in her bag when she went to work, for protection. She works for a cleaning company, and one of the three houses she's a maid in is Mr. Coleman's. It can't be a coincidence since Mr. Coleman's personal effects are still inside the vault. The same vault they tried to open when they trashed the morgue.

Mr. Coleman's only son and next of kin is still out of the country. Rami said he'll check the rest of the family, to see if there's something amiss... or someone.

He also told us that Serena identified a guy wearing the same coat and ball cap on the hospital security footage from a week ago. He walked to the reception desk and talked to the nurse there for a minute and then left, looking all bothered. It's useless to ask the nurse if she remembers him; the ones working at the reception desk see too many people every day to remember.

The bright smile the restaurant attendant aims at the people in front of us brings me back to my date. An odd little thrill passes through me, nervous energy and excitement twisting in my gut. Can't even remember the last time I had a real date. College, perhaps? Does exchanging a few words, a

rum & coke in a paper cup at a party, and then fucking in an empty room count as a date? Don't think so.

But now I'm in a posh restaurant. With my boyfriend. Who's hot as hell and accepts me completely. Can't help feeling giddy about it.

To distract myself, I look at the dark red walls of the restaurant foyer. The gaudy, tall, gold flowers in the crystal vase, the honey velvet chairs, and sparkly chandeliers all scream money to me. Even the young attendant, with her perfectly styled blond hair, red lips, and paillette dress with a plunging neckline exudes elegance and wealth.

She moves away with the other patrons and another attendant comes to take her place. A tall, TV-handsome, stylish guy who slides an obvious, leering look at Raph's body.

"Welcome to Micron 4. How can I be of assistance?" he suggestively asks, smiling invitingly at Raph.

My boyfriend gives the guy one of his perfect, megawatt smiles, still holding my hand. "Reservation under Bear-Stone, for two."

I see the glint of recognition in the attendant's eyes. They turn to dollar signs, like one of those WB cartoons. And his demeanor becomes even more flirtatious. "Mr. Bear-Stone, I personally prepared the best table in the room for you."

I snort derisively, but I'll never believe that Project Runaway did it all by himself. Not with the sparkly nail polish and snobbish attitude. He finally gives me a quick glance. But dismisses me as speedily as I do the cereal aisle at the supermarket. Really? I thought I looked quite good in my new light blue Armani shirt and black slacks.

"Please, follow me," he whispers, leaning toward Raph.

He turns toward the dining room, and Raph gestures for me to go first. Raising an annoyed eyebrow at my boyfriend, I grit my teeth, but start walking. Raph tugs my hand, probably wanting to know what's going on. But this time, I tug back and keep going. We walk across the room, leaving the bar and some already occupied tables behind.

People around us smile or wave at Raph. I can't *not* notice the way the attendant slowly and deliberately swings his hips, probably trying to catch my boyfriend's eye. I don't turn around to see if Raph actually peeked, because my mood has already dangerously plummeted. I want to strangle him, while I'm still fucking looking at that bouncy ass with images in my head of breaking it with my foot. A bitter taste invades my mouth; I think it's bile, trying to choke me.

We finally reach a red leather booth. Raph sits first. When I try to go on the other side—where the attendant is *oh-so-helpfully* gesturing for me to move to—Raph pulls on my hand so hard I lose my balance and fall half on his lap, taking some of the tablecloth with me. A gasp leaves my lips at the clinking of glasses and clanging of silverware.

“No need to take all the table with you, babe, you know I always want you next to me.” Raph smirks at me.

My glare would have fucking incinerated him if Jedi were real and I was the long-lost son of one. So, I opt for raising my knee and stomping on his foot under the table. It doesn't do anything to faze his laid-back expression and makes me even more annoyed. Stupid sturdy Italian leather boots.

The attendant's giggle sounds fake, and I hate it. I hate even more how Raph seems used to it all. Too pissed to keep listening, I tune him and my soon-to-be-very-dead boyfriend out. Does Raph let people flirt with him like this normally? Psychopaths do use their appeal to attract others, to

ultimately get what they want. And Gabe said Raph is a playboy. Which means he's not only accustomed to people being all over him, but he's into it.

He places his hand on my leg, splaying his fingers and squeezing my thigh possessively. But when I lift my eyes to his face, his gaze is intently focused on the attendant. His possessiveness, which I usually find sexy, now feels off.

Maybe I'm exaggerating, especially after how Raph has been treating me since he met me. And discovering what we were to each other. But I was so damn excited about this date, and what I'm getting is very far from my imagination. I'm seeing a different side of my boyfriend. One I don't like.

But he's rich, well-known, and handsome. It's a triple whammy. What did I expect? People stare at him even when they don't know who he is. It's in the way he stalks instead of walking, scrutinizes instead of looking, and expects instead of asking. That confidence and control that captivates even though there's something savage underneath it. The BDE effect.

Raph's voice suddenly infiltrates my dark thoughts. "Does that sound good, babe?"

The attendant is also looking at me, waiting for my reply with a nearly pitiful smile on his lips. An unsettling feeling rushes all the way up to my throat, but I swallow it back. Fuck this.

"Didn't hear a word." The attendant blinks, confused at me. "I was too distracted by your hand moving near my dick." I give Raph an empty look before looking at the baffled fucker again. "But I'd like a drink." I spear him with an icy stare. "An Adios Motherfucker, double on the tequila and vodka."

The attendant opens and closes his mouth like a dying fish. "Certainly, sir," he replies soberly. All traces of flirting are gone.

"The order of food is fine. Add another Motherfucker," I hear Raph say coldly. Huh?

The attendant clears his throat, clearly confused by Raph's sudden unfriendly tone. After giving a small bow, he leaves.

I grab the glass of water from the table and take a long gulp. The cold liquid feels like a soothing balm on my restricted throat.

Feeling Raph's intense stare on me, I give up and look. He has a smug smile on his face.

"Why the fuck are you smiling at me?"

"Because you're mine," he annoyingly answers.

I snort bitterly. "Sure. And since you're mine as well, I'll let people flirt with me and treat you like you're the invisible man then." Like that would ever happen... Shut up brain! I feel so petty.

His smirk turns menacing. "Let them try." His hand tightens on my leg.

"And it seems to me like you dealt with the situation pretty well."

I sniff haughtily at him, but the truth is that I kind of enjoyed putting the attendant in his place. Still... "Do I need to expect this every time we go out?"

"Only when we wander in certain circles. But usually, Uri is the one mingling. I just tag along sometimes."

"So you don't like it?" I hesitantly ask.

"Fuck, no. Most people bore me. It can be fun at times to play the part of the sociable playboy millionaire, but that's not me."

"Fucking around is not you?" I spit out.

"Not anymore," he simply says, looking straight into my eyes.

“So why do it? The sociable bit,” I clarify, not wanting to know anything more about the hooking up with other people part.

“It’s my duty to my company and my family.” He brushes his knuckles softly on my cheeks. “Don’t worry, I won’t let anybody disrespect you. Before, with the attendant... I needed to know.”

“Know what?” I ask, confused by his words and his feather-light touch trailing down my neck.

“Know that you can hold your own.”

“Was that a test?” I can clearly hear the affront in my voice.

He nods with a small smile, titling the corner of his lips. “And you were magnificent.”

“You dick! You turned your psycho... power on me,” I hiss. I feel so damn pissed.

“Psycho power? I like it.” He has the audacity to look happy. A waitress places two light blue cocktails on our table, and I quickly sip on mine, feeling the burn of the combination of the four types of liquors spreading down my throat.

“Motherfucker!” I swear at both the cocktail and Raph. “Don’t like to be manipulated, Raphael.” My loud voice is starting to attract attention, but I can’t seem to care about it at the moment.

“Stand up,” he abruptly orders me.

“What?” I frown at him. But he just tilts his head toward the end of the table. I pucker my lips and do as he *commanded*. Dragging myself begrudgingly out of the booth, and then waiting for him to do the same with my foot tapping the floor.

As soon as he’s on his feet, Raph grabs my nape and guides me unceremoniously toward a pink door that says toilet. He pushes me inside,

toward the opposite wall, and spins me. His hands catch his weight on the wall near my head where he cages me with his body.

“I like you jealous, you know.”

I scoff at his growly voice, turning my head to the side and ignoring my traitorous, plumping cock.

“All feisty and supercilious. You make me so fucking hard, babe.” And he grinds the very stiff proof of that on my belly, making my legs tremble.

I fist my hands at the side of my body and focus on my irritation. “You steered me like a puppet without taking my feelings into account, Raphael. And for what? Your entertainment?”

My heart thuds inside my chest, and when I look at him, I feel that nervous current going down my body whenever something important is about to happen.

“Fuck, no. Michael, people in the elite world are mostly entitled, spoiled brats who think they can act as they please because of their money and power. I have to be part of that world at times, and being as I am, I fit right in. But I need you with me. And even though I’ll fucking torture anybody who dares disrespect you, you’ll probably find yourself alone with those people sometimes. I want you to be ready.”

The firm resolve in his voice floors me. As does the softness filling his eyes. Damn. I’m such an idiot. In a very torturous way, he was trying to protect me once again. I guess I need to get used to his intricate methods.

“I’m sorry. I was so happy about going on a date with you that, when it didn’t turn out as I hoped, I just...” My fists unclench and I sigh. “I’ll just need to remember to sharpen my claws before going out, then.” I give him a small smile.

“You mean your tusks, piglet. And the date has barely started.” He leans closer, so close I can see the gold flecks gleaming inside his green eyes. My breath catches in my lungs, and he explores my parted lips with a claiming kiss. I tilt my head to the side to give his tongue more space to explore inside my mouth. I want him to touch and own every part of me, every hole, niche, and inch of my body.

When we need air, he moves his lips to my neck. “God, your skin... so fucking creamy and pale. I can see every single vein painted on your body. Feel the blood pulsing underneath.”

I moan at his adoring tone. His rigid shaft is stroking against mine, making me see stars behind my closed eyelids.

“The way your plush lips skimmed over the cocktail glass as you took a dainty, angry sip...” he snarls, staring at my swollen mouth. “All I could think about was finding a much better use for them.”

His words make my dick leak profusely, and my pulse beats like a drum at a metal concert.

“Yes!” I moan, ready to fall on my knees. But his hand around my neck stops me.

He shakes his head. “Not yet.” He takes something from his jacket before taking it off and tossing it on the wooden chair near the pink marble sink. He opens his palm and unfolds the blade from the small pocketknife he’s holding.

“Roll up one sleeve. I need to see.” My cuts. He needs to see them so he can slice his skin in the exact same spot. A wave of emotion threatens to overwhelm me and tears well in my eyes. How could I have doubted him? When he keeps showing me how much he cares? How much he understands and accepts me.

I do as he says, and when I see the red line appear under the blade on his outer forearm, a tingling sensation engulfs me. My lips quiver with desire, and my tongue feels restless inside my mouth. Blood. I can almost smell the iron scent in the air and taste Raph's sweet, metallic tang.

Why do I crave it? It's still a mystery to me, but I don't care anymore. I'm learning to just be. And it feels fucking amazing. It makes me more real, more whole. By being true to what I like, I don't feel shame anymore. And it's thanks to Raph.

Then Raph does something that sets me nearly on fire. He spits on his right hand and lets a few drops of blood from his left arm fall on the palm. He opens his jeans just enough to let his perfectly shaped cock free before wrapping it with the hand covered in saliva and blood.

His darkened eyes are zeroed in on me, but I'm hypnotized by the slow up-and-down movements of his hand. Without realizing it, I've dropped on my knees. My fingers are trailing up his jean-clad legs, stopping on the underside of his cock. I push the waistband of his briefs further down and put his balls on full display.

While he's still leisurely rubbing his dick, I tilt my head to the left and fill my mouth with one heavy cum sack. It tastes delicious, like soap and Raph. I twist my tongue around it, enjoying his grunt of pleasure.

His hand grabs the top of my hair, and he guides me to the other ball. I give it the same attention. My nose hits his hand and I can smell the penny scent on it; it makes me moan. I'm about to beg when he pushes my head back and lines his cock near my lips, grunting. My caveman.

His cock is curving slightly upward, as if silently screaming for me to suck it. A shiver of desire rocks me forward and I'm unable to resist as I circle his plump head with my tongue, feeling my eyes cross at the mix of flavors

hitting my tongue. I trace the tip over his slit and greedily drink every drop of precum that spurts out in response. I'm in fucking heaven. Popping off, I lick my way down his shaft, my tongue covering every smooth inch of skin. Then I open my mouth wide and swallow all of it down my throat in one swift thrust.

"Fuck! You're such a slut for it. Work that throat and get your fill," he groans between gritted teeth. I start bobbing up and down his length, using the whole surface of my tongue on the underside of his thick cock. My mouth is stretched full, my eyes are watery, and my knees hurt on the hard, cold floor of the public bathroom. But I've never been more lost in ecstasy. I want more.

More. More. More.

He growls while I suck harder and begins to move his hips, thrusting deeper, pausing for a second inside my throat and then moving back out. His head is all the way back, mouth open, groaning like an animal. God, he's so fucking sexy. I push a hand inside my pants to rub my cock when I hear a knock and then the unmistakable sound of the door opening. Raph's back is to it, and I'm *mostly* covered by his big body. But whoever entered can clearly see what's happening.

"Is everything okay...?" I hear the flirty attendant gasp.

Raph turns his head toward the door, while I freeze. But after a second, he starts fucking my mouth again at a furious pace.

"What the fuck are you looking at? Keep your eyes off him. Get the fuck out," he snarls at the attendant. I hear the door hurriedly closing, and Raph looks back at me, a devious smirk plastered on his lips.

"Nobody sees your lips full of cock. Only me." He pulls on my hair, making my scalp sting, but I whimper in bliss. His possessiveness makes

my heart jump inside my chest.

“I want your belly full of my cum. I want to see it slipping down your lips, running down your neck, covering the hair on your pecs. Fuck!” He rams his cock hard down my throat over and over, holding my head still.

The feeling of being used for his pleasure almost makes me nut inside my pants. But he’s the one coming. He shoots inside my throat and in my mouth, giving me more of himself. I swallow eagerly, all of it, with a happy smile on my face.

“You’re mine, too,” I whisper after he’s spent, my voice sounding gruff. I kiss the tip of his cock and lean into his caressing hand on my cheek. He suddenly yanks me up and lifts me, setting me on the counter. Then he pulls my aching dick out and takes it down his warm, tight, amazing throat in one go.

I scream, and my orgasm embarrassingly slams into me after two bobs of his head. While I’m coming, he sucks on my head avidly, making me moan or whimper—not sure what kind of sound leaves my lips. But it feels so damn good.

His face is suddenly in front of me. He opens his mouth and shows me the cum still covering his tongue and then he kisses me. I taste myself on him, and although it should make me cringe, it has the opposite effect. I grab his nape and push him closer to me, devouring him.

When our lips part, we’re both panting.

I blurt, “What if you get bored of me?” I blame my still foggy brain for my weak moment.

“Can never get bored of you. Ever,” he whispers warmly against my mouth.

“How can you be sure?” I ask, unconvinced by his pretty words.

“Can’t get bored of my arm, my lips, or my heart. It’s impossible. Irritated, fuck yes! But not wanting a part of myself anymore... not happening.” He grabs the side of my face. “You’re running in my fucking blood, Michael Caldwell. And I already told you, you’ll never get rid of me again.”

“You’re running in my blood, as well.” He’s technically in my stomach, but it feels the same to me. I touch his lips and close my eyes contentedly when his mouth kisses my fingers.

“I’m fucking starving. The food must be on the table already,” he says, pulling me down from the counter.

We are adjusting our clothes when I feel myself smirking. “The attendant sure got an eyeful when he opened the door.”

Raph gives an uncaring shrug at that, but I still feel kind of proud of myself. I’ve never been the exhibitionist type. But if witnessing our hot encounter helps to cease people’s coy attitude toward my boyfriend, I’ll suck his cock in every public toilet there is.

I turn to the sink. There’s mouthwash, disposable toothbrushes, floss, and more amenities on the counter. Gotta love high-class restaurants. I make myself presentable again, and then we return to our table. Raph sits next to me in the booth, but I’m only half-appreciating the feel of his side plastered to mine, because my eyes are fixed on the waitress who’s placing slice after slice of different kinds of cakes. There must be at least...fuck, too many for my post-orgasmic brain.

“What’s this?” I’m able to get out through my constricting throat.

“I chose this restaurant because they have twenty-one types of desserts on the menu and the pastry chef worked for three four-Michelin-star restaurants in the past.” At my stunned face, he adds, “You like cake.”

Casually, like it's an obvious conclusion. Then—just to make the moment even more tear-jerkingly perfect—he plants a sweet kiss on my temple.

Like the damn wild thing I've become, I pull his head down and attack his mouth, incapable of finding the right words to express the way my heart is bursting with joy. I crawl into his lap and keep kissing him, till my lips hurt and my stomach growls. We both laugh.

"I love you, Raph," I tell him, catching how his breathing halts for half a second before going back to normal.

He kisses me; it's much quicker and tender this time. And then we finally turn to the heavenly buffet in front of my eyes.

Best date ever.

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Chapter 15

MICHAEL

On the way up to Raph's apartment, I feel like I'm about to fall into a food coma. My stomach is going to explode, but all the sugar inside is giving me such a high that I can't stop smiling. It might also have something to do with Mr. Hottie and the great date we had. I'm so happy, I unleash a wave of joyful babbling on him.

"I ate the two best things on earth tonight: you and pies. Can't get better than this."

"How about another taste of me?" He looks so sexy pulling me near his side, with a hint of a smirk on his lips and a promise of pleasure in his eyes.

"If I wasn't about to re-enact the puking cherry scene from *The Witches of Eastwick*, I'd let you persuade me to fuck against the living room window again," I whisper sensually—as much as one can do when talking about puke.

"You like the view while I fuck you, babe?" He's much better at the sensual thing.

“I like seeing our reflection more. But the view is a bonus.”

“What I like is *you* in my apartment,” he says when the elevator doors open and we enter his penthouse.

“Yeah?” I’m unable to stop my lips from curving. Going to work in the morning from here is a bitch with all the traffic, but riding the Ducati with Raph makes up for it.

“Yeah. The air carries a hint of your sweat, and something spicy and soft lingers in places you’ve been.”

“It’s the shampoo and body soap you bought for me.”

Raph lowers his head, but instead of kissing me, he licks my cheek. Not a small lick.

But a full flat tongue one.

“Why did you dog kiss me?” I let out an astonished chuckle.

“Pachouli,” he just replies with a hungry smile, looking ready to pounce on me.

“Oh no.” I giggle, and point in warning at his face, while walking backward. “Remember the puking part.”

He doesn’t seem to care and continues prowling toward me. I hurry to the living room and put the couch between us, feeling excitement and anxiousness blend inside my gut—cake too.

“I just want to find out if you’re ticklish, piglet.” Raph stops a foot away from the couch.

“No need. I am very ticklish. So stop whatever you are thinking of doing.”

He seems to follow my pleading, but then he grabs the back of the couch with one hand and jumps, landing right next to me.

I let out a gasp. “I’m serious here, are you Spiderman?”

My phone starts to ring.

Meg's name appears on the screen, and the light atmosphere turns tense.

"Don't need to answer that," he says, losing his smirk. We've both been dodging her calls for the last three days. I'm still feeling confused by my conflicting emotions. I'm grateful for what she did for Raph, but upset about being taken away from him; all of them. But grateful again for being given a chance at an ordinary life, and upset again for being let go.

"I know," I sigh. "But I think it's time." I toss my jacket on the sofa and, placing the phone on the table, push the speaker button. At the same time, I grab a pack of chips from the kitchen. Need some salt to balance all that sugar I ate.

"Michael," a woman's voice I've never heard before comes from the other line.

"Linda," Raph says. Linda Stone: his mother and Meg's wife. I thought she was away for work.

"Hey, killer," she greets him.

"Hello," I say.

"Michael, the prodigal son, has returned."

Her words create a strained, deafening silence.

"Too soon?" she asks without an ounce of embarrassment.

"What do you think, Lin?" Meg's familiar, sarcastic tone makes my lips automatically twitch.

"Sorry," Linda mumbles. "So. You picked up the phone. That means you're ready to talk to... us."

My stomach churns, and dropping on the sofa I leave the untouched pack of chips on the coffee table. Raph soon joins me. He takes off his jacket and bends down to slip off my shoes.

"Maybe," I reply hesitantly.

“Why don’t you tell me how you feel?”

“Stop trying to psychoanalyze him, Meg,” Raph quips, pulling my feet on his lap and massaging them.

“I’m not. I just...”

“Okay. So, explain to me why you both sound upset,” Linda interjects.

Raph laughs caustically. “I’m fucking upset because you kept Michael away from me.”

“We had to. We did it to protect him... *from* you.”

“What?” I hear myself ask.

“Raph, when we found you, you were a mess. A fucking violent, feral mess—with good fucking reason. But for months, nobody could even come close to you,” Linda explains.

“All I needed was Michael!” Raph barks back. “And you knew it, since I kept saying his name... number.”

“Do you remember what happened with Rague? Huh?” Linda counters vehemently. “You almost killed each other. Not to mention Uri and Rami’s state. Even Sari. It was a shit show. Michael looked fine in comparison, even though we knew he wasn’t. We did what we thought was best, for all of you.”

“I cut myself. My arms... I cut my skin,” I confess, my voice soft and fragile compared to theirs.

“That... No!” Meg’s choked mumble makes me feel bad for her.

“Why?” Linda asks.

“Because his fucked up religious family let him think he was a monster,” Raph replies for me. His large, warm hands like anchors on my calves keep me grounded to reality. I hear a sob coming from the line and feel the need

to stop Raph. But I don't. "They were wrong for him, because I'm his fucking family. We all are."

"Fuck," Linda swears. "Megs!" There's the sound of a chair tipping over and then footsteps withdrawing.

"Damn, Raph. How many times have I told you to think before talking?" Linda scolds him.

"I have been thinking a fuck of a lot, Linda."

"Listen to me. The deal we had with the sheriff was to keep Michael for a while and then we'd have taken him back with us."

"They adopted me," I retort.

"No. They fostered you in the beginning. Meg came six months later to take you back. But when you saw her, you started crying hysterically... without stopping. Meg thought your brain linked her to what happened to you, even though you couldn't remember. She talked to your therapist and the Caldwells, and decided the best thing was to let you go. She was devastated when she came back, Michael.

"You were—still are—one of our kids. But we had to make a hard decision. Your parents adopted you and moved to another state, but we put a P.I. on you. He gave us information about your life every other month. You looked happy." Linda sounds upset now.

"Well, he wasn't. He fucking wasn't." Raph's tone has turned to ice.

"That's not what Meg told me. And why did you wait all this time? I'm thirty years old. Why not come to me earlier?" I half-yell. Guilt, unfairness, disbelief, anger; they form a ball that is lodged inside my throat. I can barely breathe.

I grab Raph's arm and then climb on top of him for the second time tonight. But I feel like falling, and I need to secure myself to his solid body. He

wraps a hand around my shoulders, and with the other he takes the phone from the table.

“I just thought...” Meg’s voice is small.

“We thought,” Linda interrupts her. “We thought you were both doing fine... apart. And we didn’t want to disrupt that. We had no idea how deeply attached you became while imprisoned. Raph, after you got better you never asked for One... Michael ever again.”

“Because I thought he was dead. And that’s what you both made me believe.”

I nuzzle my head further into his neck and slide a hand behind his nape, trying to get myself even closer to him. If I could open his chest and tuck myself inside, I would. To make him feel that I’m with him. Always.

“His name made you regress from the small progress we were making. Then, after a while, you seemed fine on your own. Couldn’t risk that,” Linda says.

“Until lately,” Meg breathes out. “I saw the change in you, Raphael. You were bored, unsettled, looking for something. I was afraid you’d get fixed on the wrong thing.”

I remember the weird comment she made about her son and my suggestion to find him a hobby.

“And Michael, you just seemed lost. I made you move to Chicago to have you closer. I came to the hospital the day I met you to introduce myself and then invite you to my home to meet the others. Maybe using an excuse at first, but to make you feel at ease with us. And after a while, I’d have told you the whole truth. But the moment I saw you, I... was mesmerized by you. You are such a good person, Michael. And you did it all on your own,

despite what your adopted parents... And it was selfish of me, but I wanted to know you better,” Meg finishes.

Her words make my heart bleed. The memories of our Fridays together shuffle inside my head, and a part of me understands her actions.

“Twenty years, Meg. Fucking twenty years! Wasted,” Raph growls, but the hardness in his voice has softened slightly.

“We’re together now. That’s all that matters,” I whisper against his neck, deciding there and then to leave all of it behind. Because if my job has taught me anything, it’s that there’s no point in wasting precious time. In a blink of an eye it’s gone. Can’t rewind and get it back.

“I’m sorry.” Linda means it this time; I can hear the remorse in her voice.

Raph groans, flexing his hand around the phone, and grabbing my thigh with the other in a death grip.

“It’s done. Let it go,” I say softly in his ear, resuming peppering his neck with slow kisses.

“We need time to... process all this,” I tell both Linda and Meg. “Just give us a few days to think.”

“I’m here,” Meg murmurs.

“Take all the time you want,” Linda replies. “And Michael, I’m looking forward to meeting you.”

Raph hangs up the call, and I let out a long sigh.

“Fuck.”

“My thought exactly,” I tell him against his skin. I feel a bit lighter after talking to them. I’m still deeply upset, but I know this is the start of a new chapter. An understanding and forgiving one.

“I can’t let go that easily,” he says after a while.

“Nothing easy about it. Let’s try to enjoy the present and think less about the past, though.”

“You’re here.” He sinks his hand into my hair and holds tight.

“I’m here.” I wiggle on his lap. His cock is justifiably soft, but I can work on that. He needs to be reminded that us being together is the only important thing.

But Raph’s phone starts ringing—yet again interrupting us—and I have just enough time to see Rami’s name before he snatches it up from the sofa and lifts it close to his ear.

“What?” he answers in a bored tone.

After a few seconds of listening, he shifts his body, sliding me gently down on the leather cushion as he stands.

“Wait,” he says to me, or maybe Rami.

The phone call seems serious, even more so when Raph disappears inside his bedroom, looking for privacy. From me. It stings that he still feels the need for it. My rational side is telling me to back off. But what could he possibly say to Rami that I can’t hear? Something related to work, maybe?

My head is too crowded with flashes of the conversation I just had with Linda and Meg. I can’t think properly. I don’t really want to; I feel drained. My eyes fall on the chips on the table, and I find myself considering if eating something is a good idea. Decision made, I walk to the fridge and find it empty, apart from a jar of mayo and a stick of butter.

I need something to wash the sour cream and onion chips’ flavor down, and water won’t do. I glance at the round minimalist clock on the kitchen wall. Eleven o’clock. The incredibly pricy store a couple of blocks down is open until midnight; I can go quickly and get a bottle of soda.

After writing a short note to Raph, I slip my shoes on and grab my jacket before heading toward the elevator. I could knock on his door and tell him I'm going out. But his Houdini act says it all—he clearly doesn't want to be disturbed. And it fucking ticks me off. I need some fresh air to clear my mind. My emotions are too raw, and I don't want to come across as spiteful. The night guard greets me from behind the large desk in the lobby. I wave back without stopping. Outside the air is cool when I start walking. Cars pass by and the mild weather invites people to walk on the well-lit street. I reach the store and quickly buy the soda. Taking a shortcut on the way back, I turn into an alley. I suddenly feel eyes on me.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and I quicken my steps. The narrow passage is poorly illuminated compared to the main street, but I can clearly hear footsteps behind me. My heart starts beating furiously inside my chest and fear twists around my spine, gripping tightly. When I reach the two big dumpsters almost at the end of the alley, a hand grabs my shoulder and I'm spun forcefully around. The plastic bag with the soda flies somewhere while I'm pushed hard against the brick wall.

My back hurts when it hits the hard surface, and my eyes squeeze shut against the pain for a second. A guy is in front of me. He's wearing a ball cap and a long dark coat—a size too big. Fuck! He's the same guy who tried to rob the convenience store and trashed the morgue.

His mouth is stretched into a long angry line. His eyes are hidden by the cap's visor, but I can clearly see the knife he's holding in his hand. He's keeping a foot between us, just enough for the blade to sink inside my chest if I attempt a move. My hands are up in surrender, and I'm trembling like a leaf in the breeze.

“Finally alone, Doctor.” He spits out my title. His breath smells heavily of whiskey, but he doesn’t look drunk.

I’m close to peeing myself, but I try to think clearly. This guy knows who I am. He keeps coming after me. He wants something from me. So, until he gets it, he *probably* won’t kill me.

“W-what is it that you want?” My voice is lower than I expected, but I don’t even know how I’m still standing at the moment.

“The ring,” he barks.

“Ring?” I ask, confused.

“My uncle’s damn ring!” Spit flies from his mouth to my cheek as he keeps yelling at me, the hand holding the knife trembling dangerously. “The one you have inside that fucking safe at the morgue.”

“I don’t...” I try to make sense of what he’s talking about, but it’s very hard to think when your life is being threatened.

“Frank Coleman. He died at the hospital last week. His personal effects are still at the morgue because his idiot son is coming back from Africa.”

“Can’t you wait for his return?” I stupidly blurt out.

He grabs the front of my shirt and slams me against the wall again. My head hits the brick this time, and pain explodes behind my eyes.

“That’s exactly what I don’t want, you idiot. That fucking ring is worth a fortune, and I want it. I deserve it. I’m his nephew and need to get something as well,” he snarls, pushing the sharp point of the blade right over my heart.

Raph. His face pops in front of my eyes. I should have let him know I was going out; I should have kissed him, hugged him, told him once again how much I love him.

I swallow hard all my regret, while trying to find a way to calm the man down or stall. But nothing comes to mind.

“We are going to the morgue together, and you will give me that ring. Otherwise, I’ll cut your other fingers,” he hisses.

“Other fingers?” My quivering voice is dripping with fear.

A frightening smirk appears slowly on his lips, curling them in an evil grin. And that’s when he tilts his head and looks straight at me. His pupils are blown suggesting exposure to some kind of chemical or drug. There’s a maniacal glint in his cold, empty eyes. Broken images from my past suddenly assault my brain, and for a second, I’m overwhelmed by echoes of pain, hopelessness, terror, and horror.

“Give me your hand.” His demanding voice takes me back to the dark alley, to the stench of rotten food and the honking cars in the distance. I’m panting, my head pulses, and I feel the need to scream.

But I only breathe out, “No.”

I fist both hands and get ready to fight. I fucking work with my hands and I won’t let him take that away from me. So much has been taken already. My childhood. Raph. My self-love. No more.

Anger suddenly spreads inside me, and I’m about to do something really stupid when I hear Rague’s unmistakable gruff voice.

“And what do we have here?”

We both snap our heads his way. He’s walking slowly toward us. His wide shoulders and massive, muscular body obscure the light from the alley opening.

“None of your business. Go away!” The guy’s words are cocky, but I can feel the sudden tension in the hand he’s tightening around my shirt. God, how much I want to push him away and... hurt him.

“Don’t like to be told what to do,” Rague responds with menacing indifference, moving closer.

I’m abruptly yanked forward, the guy’s arm locked around my neck, and I can feel the blade digging behind my back, through the leather jacket.

“Back away or I’ll kill him!” he yells near my ear.

I’m facing Rague now. I can’t see his face well, but I can feel his eyes on me.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” he utters in a casual tone, stopping a few feet from us.

“And why is that?” The guy starts to drag me backward. He stinks of body odor and cheap alcohol. If he doesn’t kill me, his repugnant smell will.

“Because—” Raph’s icy voice comes from behind me, sending a current of electricity and relief down my body.

In the next moment, I hear the guy’s painful scream and I’m released from his hold. When I turn, he’s on the dirty ground. His arm is at a weird angle, Raph is holding the knife, and his heavy boot is pressed against the guy’s throat, making him gargle.

“You hurt what’s mine. Soon, you’ll be wishing you were dead,” Raph growls. He lifts his foot and furiously kicks the guy’s side, making him cough and whimper. Then, with the heel of his heavy boot, he hits the guy’s face, knocking him out.

I gasp in shock at his show of fury.

“Wow!” Rague claps his hands next to me, like he’s enjoying a great show. I’m not sorry for the piece of shit on the floor; I’m kind of liking the payback he’s getting. But I’m not encouraging it either. “Well done foster brother. Haven’t seen that kind of passion in years.”

Thick, dark blood trails out of the unconscious piece of shit's nose, but he's still breathing.

"Holy shit!" I stroke a hand over my face, not surprised to feel it trembling. Raph steps in front of me. He grabs my chin and turns my head to one side and then the other. When I wince, he frowns at me.

"I hit my head on the bricks," I explain and then look down at my chest. There's a little blood on the fabric where the blade dug into my skin.

"Motherfucker!" Raph growls, staring at the red stain.

"It's nothing. I'm okay," I say, trying to calm him down. But seeing how he pummeled the guy, I don't think it's going to work right now.

My eyes fall on Rague, who's turned the guy on his stomach and is wrapping his hands with a cable tie. His arm is definitely broken, with an open fracture on the humerus.

"Who's this dick, anyway?" Rague asks me.

"He's Mr. Coleman's nephew. He wants a ring that's in the vault at the morgue. Apparently, it's worth a fortune." I exhale, wrapping my arms around myself and dropping my forehead on Raph's shoulder. His hand runs through my hair, comfortably massaging my scalp and making me shiver.

"He's the fucker who tried to rob the convenience store. He's got the same geometrical tattoo on his wrist," my boyfriend says.

"But why rob the store? Did he intend to kidnap you and make it look like you were a hostage or something?" Rague asks.

"He wanted Michael's keys to the vault. That's why he tried to rob the store after stealing the gun from his late uncle's cleaning lady, Ms. Scalini. He must have been desperate trying to open the safe without the keys when he broke into the morgue," Raph explains.

“Failing again.”

“I think he’s under the influence of some kind of drug,” I tell them.

“This guy is a drug addict and an idiot. Dangerous combination.” Rague shakes his head, kicking the guy’s shoe.

“He was about to cut my fingers, so I guess you’re right.” I let out a hysterical short laugh, realizing I blurted out the wrong thing as soon as it came out. Because Raph’s body stiffens, and his hand halts the soothing circles on my head. A low, scary growl vibrates through his chest; I can feel it against my palm.

“I’ll bring the van to the end of the alley. Can’t back it in here; it’s too narrow,” Rague says before walking away.

“Van?” I ask Raph.

“You could have died, Michael,” he snarls, tilting my head back with force, so his blazing eyes are piercing mine.

I fist his t-shirt while trying to find the right words. “I know. I…”

“Why did you leave without telling me? You left your phone,” he hisses back without letting me talk.

“I forgot the phone. And you were clearly busy. You closed yourself in the bedroom, not wanting me to hear whatever Rami was telling you,” I retort. But I quickly avoid his angry eyes, feeling suddenly petty and annoyed. Mostly at myself.

He sighs and lets go of me, turning his head toward the ground. When he looks at me again, his expression is blank.

“He called to tell me about Mr. Coleman's nephew, Robert Barring. He owns money to a lot of people and fit the robber's body description. I believe this is him.” He waves at the body on the ground. “Jesus, Michael. You were already shaken up after the phone call and I didn't want you to get

even more overwhelmed. Now go back to the penthouse and wait for Rami there.” His voice sounds detached.

“Where are you going?” I grab his arm before he can turn away.

“To end this,” he says, looking down at the unconscious guy.

“What does that mean?” I tighten my grip on him.

“When I come back, we need to talk. And I’ll tell you everything about what I do. What my family does.”

“Tell me now,” I insist, because I have a pretty good—if not bizarre—idea of what that is. Still, there are too many questions I need answers to.

“Michael, now is not the time. Somebody could see us. I need to take this shithead away.” His voice is composed, but his hands are still balled up into fists.

“Away where? What will you do to him?”

He shakes off my hand and grabs the guy’s feet, dragging him toward the end of the alley.

“Raph, we should call the police. Detective Spencer...”

“Rami also said that the police have no new leads. Nothing was stolen from the morgue, and they couldn’t identify the guy from the video feed or his fingerprints,” Raph tells me while still hauling the body across the dirty ground.

“But we can. We got the guy,” I try again.

“Yes. And he’ll pay for hurting you.”

“You mean *you* will make him pay.” Raph doesn’t acknowledge my words and keeps going, until he reaches the end of the narrow path. The light from the street reveals his face, showing cold and unstoppable resolve.

“You don’t need to do it. Not for me,” I tell him in a softer tone.

He turns to me, while Rague opens the back of an old, black van. There's a predatory smirk on Raph's lips, one he had on his face when I first saw him that night at the convenience store.

"That's the thing, babe, it's not a choice. I need to do it," he says cryptically. "Now go to the penthouse and wait for Rami."

"But I want to come with you." I'm not sure I'm ready for whatever I might find, but I want to know.

He studies my eyes for a few seconds. "Next time," he says, making me sigh in relief. Or irritation. A mix of both, maybe.

Together with Rague, they pull the guy up and toss him inside the van. The small back street is almost deserted, but the way they did it looked like they were helping a drunk friend.

"What time will you come back home?" I ask Raph before he gets inside the car. He stops and then turns to me, eliminating the distance between us. The kiss he gives me is hungry and dirty and too quick. But when he pulls away, a sweet smile I've never seen before softens his face. "It'll take some time before I get... home. Try to sleep."

Like that's possible. The adrenaline is still rushing inside me. And I'm dreading finding out what they'll do with the guy they just threw inside the van. Not because I care about his fate—I actually hope he rots in hell—but I do worry about Raph.

Nevertheless, I do as he said. On the way back to the penthouse, I can't stop myself from continuously checking if someone is following me—like a paranoid nut case. I take a long, calming breath only when the elevator opens inside Raph's apartment. Rami is not here yet, and the place is eerily silent.

I stumble to the bathroom, yanking my pants off and then the rest of my clothes, not caring where they fall. Once I'm naked, I get inside the shower stall and let the water try to wash away the scary, so damn surreal occurrence I've just experienced. I try to focus on my body.

The cut on my chest isn't deep, and the back of my head hurts only slightly. I don't feel a bump under my fingers. My tense muscles start to relax under the soothing cascade, and I wish I could enjoy its warm cocoon fully. But my errant mind won't let me.

I can't stop seeing the guy's cruel eyes or feeling the sting of his knife against my skin. Hearing his threatening words.

"Fuck!" My hands ball up against the shower tiles and I squeeze my eyes.

I recall more. Rague's collected, almost cocky demeanor. The cable tie at hand, and the shady black van. The confident way they took care of the guy. Raph's imperturbable behavior and cold execution when facing danger. At the convenience store, he knew the gun's safety was on just with a look. Rami's fast ways of obtaining information. How the whole family seems interested and at ease when talking about crimes. What does it all mean?

I get out of the shower and wrap a towel around my waist. Water runs in rivulets down my chest and legs. I push my wet hair back and wipe the drops off my face.

What we do, Raph had said. Are they criminals? And if they are, do I still want to be part of the family? To stay with him?

My reflection catches my eye. The cuts covering my arms are such a harsh sight. White and reddish lines. Irregular scars. Each one reminds me of my perversion. The skin feels uneven under my fingertips. I've always perceived them as the ugly, shameful proof of my deviance—until Raph. Because when he looks at them, he just sees me. He doesn't feel repulsed or

horrified. On the contrary, he wants to share my wickedness with me. He understands my inner need.

But is he a gangster? An assassin? A thug? Could I ever leave him if he was?

“Ahhhh!” I scream with exasperation. The beginning of a headache throbs between my eyes.

I walk back into the bedroom and grab a pair of boxers and a t-shirt from his closet and put them on. I let my body flop backward on the bed—the absence of gravity for half a second embraces me, until I hit the mega comfy mattress. My pink piggy is near the pillow. Without thinking, I bring it to my chest and stare at the white ceiling.

I feel like crap. My head hurts; my mind can’t stop conjuring shit. And I’m worried about Raph. About everything. I’m irritable and restless. All signs of an adrenaline dump. My body is slowly coming down from the rush. The drop in blood sugar is causing my legs to feel tingly and my hands to shake slightly.

The only two things that are giving me comfort right now are the piggy plastered against my pec and the small nightlight illuminating the bedroom, both given to me by Raph.

I wish he was here.

The headache is getting worse. And as I close my eyes, some of the dark jumble of memories that crowded my head while I was in that alley comes back. The deep fear from the knife attack must have unlocked my brain, which leaked flashes of that horrible past. In my uneven breathing, there’re still lingering traces of the terror I relived. Raph—or should I say Subject Two—was in every recollection. Watching me. Helping me. His constant presence felt natural. Essential.

It still is. I still need him, here with me.

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Chapter 16

MICHAEL

I must have fallen asleep, because when I open my eyes, the headache is gone. But I feel groggy. I'm in the fetal position on my side. The piggy is crushed between my arms. The clock on the dresser shows that I've been asleep for three hours. I lift my head when I hear a noise from the living room. Thinking it's Raph, I slide awkwardly off the bed, hurry out of the bedroom, and down the corridor.

But it's Rami's brawny body standing in the kitchen. His wide shoulders flex under the thin t-shirt. Who says that hackers can't be built like a tank? He turns and moves toward the couch, holding a bowl full of popcorn. Some animal documentary is on TV.

"Hello, Sleeping Beauty. You really did meet Maleficent last night," he teases. But his gaze quickly slides up and down my body, like he's checking if I'm okay.

"Where's Raph?" I ask, looking around even though I know he's not in the apartment. Because he'd be all over me, as he always is when I'm near.

“What the fuck are those?” Rami jumps up from the sofa and rushes toward me, lifting my arms with his red-gloved hands.

I freeze, hit by self-consciousness. “Fuck! I forgot about them,” I murmur.

I forgot about them, I repeat slowly in my head.

I feel surprised by my carelessness, and also... good. I’ve never left my arms bare before, too afraid people will see the scars and turn their judgmental or, even worse, pitiful eyes on me. Too embarrassed by the sight myself. But now? Now I know it’s going to be okay. I’m starting to accept them as part of who I am. Of who I’ve become. A small smile stretches my lips.

“Why do you look happy? Who did this to you, Michael? I will personally pass the axe to Raph when we find them.”

All so violent in this family. Maybe I’m right and they are criminals. The thought doesn’t scare me as much as it should.

“No need for that.” I pat his arm affectionately. “Unless you want to help Raph kill me.” I chuckle, touched by his caring disposition toward me.

“Say that again?” Rami is looking at me like I’m a nut job, and maybe I am.

“It’s a long story. But you don’t need to worry about it. Did you see my phone?” I move past him, searching for it.

“There.” He points at the sideboard near the entrance.

I unlock it and notice a message from several hours ago from Detective Polsner.

Dr Caldwell, I’m sorry to disturb you, but I need to talk to you privately about some new evidence I found. Please contact me as soon as you can.

Now it’s too late—or should I say too early—to reply to the Detective, so I type out a message to Raph, asking where he is.

“Did you hear from your brother?”

“Which one?”

“Raph.” Obviously.

“Oh, the foster brother.”

“I thought they were all foster brothers to you. Why do you all keep specifying it anyway?” I ask him, walking into the kitchen while staring at my phone.

“Because since we were kids, Raph has been making the distinction between Sari and us, for some weird reason. We just like to fuck with him sometimes.”

I drink some water and then shake my head. “Where is he, Rami? He’s not replying.” I sound like a clingy bitch. But I need to talk to him.

“He’ll be here soon. Just relax and check out the satanic gecko.”

“The what?”

He pats the space near him on the sofa and then gestures to the TV. “He’s the black sheep of the gecko family, with those reptilian red eyes and wicked eyebrows.”

The gecko in question is mottled brown, with big eyes and a very long tongue. His tail looks like a leaf. But yeah, his eyes do look devilish with those projections over them. I sit next to Rami and tuck my legs under me.

“He reminds me of Raph.” Rami smirks, earning a bump to his shoulder.

“How was he as a kid?” I suddenly ask, feeling eager to know more.

“Was he ever a kid?” His eyebrows kick up in mocking shock. But then he adds, “He was aloof, cunning, and suspicious. It took time for him to trust us and feel part of the *famiglia*.” He says the word in a horrendous imitation of Super Mario’s voice. “But to be fair, we were all wary around each other in the beginning.”

“I wish I was there,” I mumble.

“It was mayhem. I don’t know how Linda didn’t kill us all.” He smiles before adding, “And I’m glad you’re here now.”

I smile back.

“You weren’t all adopted, but you still lived together, right?”

He nods. “Raph and Sari didn’t have parents, but the rest of us had a drug addict mother, a father doing time, a drunk uncle... you get the picture. Meg and Linda wanted to adopt all of us, but it’d have turned messy. Those kinds of lowlifes are greedy. And the last thing we needed was attention on us. The government wanted to forget about what happened, pretending it never did. And shoved it under so much shit not even a dung beetle could find it.”

“Fuck,” I swear.

Instead of looking pissed, Rami’s lips are curled in an evil smirk. “Yeah. Don’t sweat it.”

“Really?” I’m astonished by his indifference.

“Karma took care of them all.” He clears his throat. “Anyway, Linda and Meg fostered us, but I personally never felt treated differently by Raph or Sari. I just happened to have a different surname. And fuck, don’t I feel lucky about that.”

I snort. “Bear-Stone sounds like a Jumanji made-up name.”

“Uhhh, I should use it for one of my characters,” he exclaims excitedly.

“Characters?”

“I create video games in my free time.” That sounds cool. “How about Snake-Stone... too Harry Potter? Gorilla-Rock... too Dwayne Johnson. Bird-Pebble... sounds like a drug order. You really don’t remember a thing?”

It takes my brain a second to realize that Rami asked me something. The quick change of topic confuses me.

“About being captive,” he adds.

“Lately, broken memories are resurfacing. But they’re too few, and messy. I can’t puzzle them back together. My dissociated brain is acting more like an old woman with dementia.”

“Dissociation, huh? Better than other brain processes, I can assure you,” he mutters, looking away. “Keep it that way, Mike. That’s my advice. We had years to work on that shit, and still, we need...” His words trail away.

“What?” A therapist? A weekend at the spa? A racketeering business?

“Look! The Trap-door spider. Scary fucker.” He points at the TV again. “He constructs his burrow underground and waits until he hears his prey close by, then *zap!* He grabs it and pulls it down.” Rami grins at the ugly black spider on the screen. Guess the deep talk is over. “Let’s hope the radiation from one of the government’s fucked up top secret projects doesn’t turn one into a gigantic Godzilla. I’d be his biggest groupie, before he eats us all. Love a patient killer.”

Ooookay.

“Speaking of killers, Detective Polsner texted me he found new evidence. He wants me to contact him,” I tell him, grabbing some popcorn from the bowl.

“He did? Oh, Serena must be done by now.”

“Done?”

He grabs his phone from the coffee table. “I checked the last victim’s work files. Maybe he’d met the killer before? Or one of his clients did.”

“Plausible,” I say.

“Right? But Mr. Thomas only had paper files in his office. Which are... blah.” He fake gags. “The police didn’t find a laptop at his place.”

“Maybe the killer took it to cover his tracks,” I suggest.

“That’s what Uri said as well. But his mother’s house was two blocks down from his home, and that’s where his laptop was.”

“How did you...?” I let the words die, already aware of Rami’s under-the-table methods. “But aren’t you afraid to get caught? You act so casual talking about the police and doing illegal things.”

“I’m mega careful not to leave any trace. Plus, Linda is a friend of a couple of Chicago police chiefs. And the Superintendent of Police is one of the many prominent people who consults Meg when in need of a work-related psychiatric evaluation. Should I go on?”

“Wow, Meg is really the GOAT.”

“She sure is. Linda is a badass as well. Anyway, the therapist’s laptop had files on each patient in the last three years. They were very thorough. After the first three, I was so bored, a knife in the eye sounded like a good idea. So I let Serena do it. Here.” He passes me the bowl still filled with popcorn.

“Why did you make it if you had no intention of eating?”

He shrugs, his eyes not moving from the screen. “Hoped the smell would wake you up. Serena, darling, are you done with the shrink’s laptop?”

“Yes, gym rat,” Serena hilariously answers.

“Thank you so much for that,” he mutters at me.

“Oh, you are so welcome,” I reply with a very satisfied smile.

“Hello, Michael.”

“Serena, how are you today?” I ask her.

“My processors are delivering an outstanding performance while consuming low battery, which equates to very well, thank you.”

“Darling?” Rami interjects.

“So... cozy.” I wiggle my eyebrows suggestively at him.

“Ewww. She’s my baby, I’m not an incestuous perv!”

“Then why doesn’t she call you daddy?”

“You’re right, Michael. It makes sense,” Serena happily utters.

“Fuck! Why does she listen to you?” Rami grumbles.

I snicker. “She’s amazing. When did you... make her?”

“I started working on an AI assistant when I was sixteen. But it took me years to create the sophisticated Serena. She’s my favorite baby.”

“Thank you, Daddy.”

I laughed noisily, but I’m blown away by Rami’s brainpower.

“Great,” Rami mumbles. “Darling, did you find anything of relevance in those files?”

“No. But in his calendar for the last two months, he had a weekly appointment with a patient: Detective Diaz.”

“That’s one of the detectives working on the Rope Killer case,” I say.

“Did you check his file?” Rami asks her.

“There’s no file for Detective Diaz.”

“Why didn’t the detective say anything about his relationship with the victim?” My mind is going back to the times I met the detective. I don’t recall anything unusual. He was very professional. But although I’ve met him several times, I can’t recall his face well. He’s one of those people you forget about the moment they leave.

“Serena, I want everything on Detective Diaz. A full background,” Rami orders her.

“On it.”

My phone starts ringing; the name on the screen says it’s Rague.

“How? I don’t have his number,” I say, confused.

“You have all our numbers,” Rami tells me. “Just answer it.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “We need to talk about boundaries, Mister.”

“Rague,” I say into the phone.

“Hey Michael, can you get Raph, please?”

“Raph isn’t here,” I tell him, a sinister feeling stiffening my spine. I push the speaker button. Rami needs to hear this.

“No? He left an hour ago.” Rague confirms my ominous feeling.

“Was he coming directly here?” Rami asks his brother.

“He was going to Michael’s place to get a few things.”

“Things?” I don’t know what he could possibly want from my apartment.

“His phone goes straight to voicemail,” Rami says. “Serena, find Raph’s cell.”

“Tracking Raph’s phone.”

“I’m in my car, not far from your place. I’ll go check it out,” Rague lets me know.

“Thank you. We should go too.” I turn to Rami.

He nods, but then Serena replies, “Raph’s phone is off. Do you want me to use his physical tracker to find him?”

“Physical tracker?” I stop my pacing to look at Rami.

“He has a small tracker behind his ear. We all have one.” He moves his lobe and I see a small bump under his skin. Why do they have a tracker? Who is this family? Some kind of military spy team?

“Use it.” Rague’s gruff voice makes me nod in agreement.

“Hold, please.” It takes Serena a few seconds, but then she says, “He’s on Cicero Avenue, inside the Brach’s abandoned candy factory.”

“What the fuck?” I hear Rague swear. “On my way there. I’ll call the others.” He hangs up.

“What is going on?” I ask Rami. “Why is he in an abandoned factory?”

“I don’t know. But I need you to prepare yourself. We’re always very cautious, but who knows?”

“Cautious? What are you talking about?” I ask, on the verge of a breakdown. Was Raph in danger?

“Now is not the time. You need to keep it together. We don’t know anything yet. But we will.” He looks so collected. Is it because he’s used to this kind of situation? Well, I’m not, and the panic is overtaking me.

“Rami, Raph... I can’t...” I choke out. I can’t get enough air inside my lungs. Where did it all go? The thought of being without him makes my inside twist painfully.

“I know. I’ll get him back. It’s my job.” He squeezes my shoulder in a comforting gesture and then lets me go.

“Serena, send me the candy factory coordinates.” Rami keeps giving her orders, but I’m shuffling to the bedroom to yank a pair of pants and a jacket on, before returning to the living room.

“I’m coming with you,” I tell Rami, putting as much finality as I can in my voice.

After he gives me a firm nod, I go for my sneakers in the entrance.

“I guess it’s time for you to learn the family business.”



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Chapter 17

RAPHAEL

“Why didn’t you go with him?” Rague asks me, sitting in the corner of the FUNS room. The guy who attacked Michael has his hands and feet tied to the chair, looking terrified.

“Huh?” I throw Rague’s way. I’m trying to concentrate on the task at hand—choosing a tool to make the fucker pay for hurting my boyfriend.

“You should have gone with Michael,” Rague insists. “I could have taken care of *that*.” He points at the fucker, who just pissed himself. Pathetic.

“Why? He was fine and I need to deal with this piece of shit myself.”

The pissy fucker whimpers, snot coming out of his nose. At least he stopped begging.

“Really?” I hear Gabe say through the intercom, surely referring to the crying mess sitting on the chair, not to Rague’s confusing statement.

I grab the shears from the table, remembering the fucker threatening to cut Michael’s fingers. Payback is a bitch.

“He wasn’t fine. He was frightened and needed you. You put your revenge ahead of his needs,” Rague keeps annoyingly going. I asked him to stay in the room with me. Because this is a revenge kill, and that goes against our family code. His sole presence reminds me of that.

“How would you know what my boyfriend needs?” I retort.

He shrugs. “The real question is, do you?”

Fuck.

“Who’s the donor?” Gabe asks.

“No donor. He has so much heroin and alcohol in his veins, his blood has turned black.” Rague gestures at the multiple holes in the guy’s arms. The fucker owed a bunch of money to a lot of shady people. That’s why he wanted his uncle’s ring so badly. I’d have never even looked his way if he hadn’t hurt what’s mine.

“He attacked Michael,” I hiss.

“Since you’re here, I guess Michael is fine,” Gabe states.

“Physically, at least.” Rague is taunting me.

Gabe only hums. “Was it a mugging thing?”

Rague gives a short retelling of the attack, while I turn to the fucker who faints at the sight of the shears. I want to make the coward suffer as soon as he wakes up. To annihilate him. The primal urge to protect Michael rushes through my veins.

The first thing I’ll do as soon as I’m done here is move his stuff to my place. His apartment is not safe enough. The thought of him permanently staying in my penthouse infuses me with calm and satisfaction.

Rague splashes a bucket full of water on the fucker’s face, making him sputter and spit.

I let the coldness embrace me, pushing away all the unwanted emotions to utterly focus on the trembling scumbag in front of me. Shears in hand, I take a step and...

The dreamy memory disappears like fog in the morning, and the first thing that hits me is the suffocating smell of mold. I scrunch up my nose and snort uselessly, trying to get it out of my nostrils. Then the dead silence around me registers. Michael's apartment is quite noisy due to the thin walls and proximity to a large hospital, which means I'm somewhere else.

It takes a few tries to open my heavy eyelids. A dull, raw ache flares in my head, but I manage to focus my gaze on my hands. They are tied to a chair; there's some kind of padding between the rope and my wrists. It protects them. Somebody doesn't want to leave bruises on my skin.

I'm not wearing my leather jacket, but I can't see it anywhere. That angers me. That's my favorite leather jacket. The cemented floor is covered in dust. The walls have vines climbing up the ceiling. The large room looks like a disused warehouse. There are old wooden crates on one side, and rusty storage shelving on the other. A camping lantern illuminates part of the room. The small dirty window on my right looks like a black hole of darkness. I turn my head more to the left and notice the body lying a few feet away on the floor.

I recognize one of the detectives I've met at the morgue in those sightless eyes. Blood soaks the front of his shirt. He must have died recently; his face is still rosy. My kidnapping has to be connected to the Rope Killer. Am I about to meet him?

The usual dark hunger spreads inside of me and I pull against the tight restraints impatiently, hearing a few cracks coming from the ancient chair. Being around other killers always turns me overly eager... to make them

bleed. The pocketknife is making a hole inside my boot. Whoever brought me here didn't pat me down for weapons. And they also left my feet free. Big mistake.

Just when I'm about to start oscillating my body on the wooden chair, the door to my right opens.

And I stare coldly at the man walking toward me.

"Mr. Bear-Stone. Surprised to see me?" He smirks with what I can only read as satisfaction.

I tilt my head and keep studying his dark eyes. I thought the dislike I felt the first time I met him was related to his profession, and the way he ogled Michael. But now I wonder if my instincts were trying to warn me against another predator.

"I gotta say, I didn't expect to find you in the doctor's apartment."

"Really? I couldn't have made my claim more obvious." I snort derisively at him.

Polsner's lips turn into a pout, but he keeps gloating. "That? It's null since I claimed him a month before." He stops in front of me.

Hearing him spout his pretentious claim on Michael makes me want to strangle him with the police badge hanging from his neck. And fuck, I just figured out the Rope Killer's murder weapon.

A police badge's chain...so devious. I kind of like it.

"The doctor is mine."

"The fuck he is." The derisive way Michael responded to the idea of Polsner ogling him clearly showed that nothing ever happened between them.

"I'm not interested in him that way." He throws me a disgusted look. "He was going to be my next prey, before you came along. Every time I fucking

checked, you were with him.” He sighs.

“Michael doesn’t have hemophilia,” I stated.

“True, but it’s too fucking hard to find the right candidates. And Dr. Caldwell...” Polsner lets out such a pleasure-filled moan, that it makes me want to punch his mouth. “He’s so tempting, with his blue eyes and fragile disposition. He’ll be next. Well, next next,” he adds, smiling devilishly at me.

“You’re so fucking delusional, as well as sloppy.” It’s kind of hard to use a bored tone when I’m burning with fury. If this sick prick thinks he can touch what’s mine, he deserves to feel how terrifying and painful my wrath is. Code be damned. This is the exception.

“Sloppy? Five victims and I’m still on the loose.”

Going off instinct, I say, “Damn luck. It’s a miracle you didn’t get busted before.”

“Each one of my kills was perfect,” he deadpans.

I can see a hint of irritation in his eyes, so I continue. “Like the last one? You moved the body. Which tells me it didn’t go as smooth as you predicted.”

“Improvisation is needed at times. The good therapist’s snooping-around forced me to *ask* him a few questions, and it all inevitably ended up into his death.”

“And this?” I wave my restrained hands. “How do you explain me?”

He sniffs. “An inconvenience to get rid of.”

I’m a damn millionaire with a media circus and a family ready to find out what happened to me, and this fucker calls me an inconvenience. Maybe he’s *really* sloppy—and with a massive I’m-untouchable superiority

complex. “Was your partner scooping around, too? Yet another person who figured out you like to strangle fragile-looking guys.” I smirk.

He grits his teeth at my taunting, and his relaxed posture turns rigid. I’m getting to him. Like most serial killers, he wants people to think of him as one of the greatest murderers in history. And he likes to gloat. I almost roll my eyes at his stupid weakness. I still don’t know how to release myself, but I need to stall until I figure it out.

“Sloppy,” I say in a singsong voice I’ve heard Rami use when he wants to be a pain in the ass.

“Cocky words from the guy tied to a chair.”

“You knocked me out from behind,” I remind him. The ache in the back of my head is proof of that. “Although, that’s not how you normally work on your victims. You do have a thing for attacking from the back.”

“A frontal shot to the chest isn’t my preference either. But sometimes you have to bend to the circumstances.” He waves his hand toward his partner’s dead body, looking annoyed by it.

“How do you make your victims trust you? Is it the badge?” I’ve found that people are usually unwary around law enforcement and clergymen.

“That surely helps. But I also use a drug that makes them feel a bit softer toward me before killing them.”

“Michael didn’t find any trace of drugs in their blood.”

“Because it dissolves within two hour of ingestion. Ingenious, isn’t it?” He raises a brow at me, expecting... What? A round of applause? *Unfortunately*, my hands are tied.

“Not particularly. Just like your name: Rope Killer.” I chuckle.

“I didn’t choose it,” he barks, moving toward the shelves and then back toward the door. “Those fucking police medical examiners did.”

I discreetly move my hands against the paddings again to calculate the sturdiness of the armrests.

“It’s ridiculous, since technically you don’t even use rope to strangle them,” I add to cover the cracking of the chair. “But the Necklace Killer sounds even worse.”

If my brothers aren’t on their way here now, they will be soon. Rami must be wondering where I am. I’m pretty sure I’m quite far from Michael’s place, so it must have taken time for Polsner to bring me here and secure me to the chair. One hour, maybe two? My tracker will tell them where I am. But I want to fuck this asshole up myself.

“So, you figured it out. Bravo. You’re not the dumb millionaire I thought you’d be.” He lifts the metal chain from his neck and pulls it off.

“Like I care what you think,” I retort, looking at the way he’s holding the chain between his gloved hands. A dark desire fills his eyes. I know that hungry expression very well. It’s the one I have on my face every time I’m alone with a donor.

“So, you’re going to kill me like one of your victims? I thought I wasn’t your type.” I *tsk*. My black hair, green eyes, and muscular body are a far cry from his preferred prey.

“Why aren’t you scared? Do you think someone is going to come and save you? We couldn’t be further away from your opulent life. Nobody will ever find you here.” He sneers, leaning toward me and invading my personal space. A headbutt is very doable if he comes a little bit closer.

“Just not scared of you, I guess,” I deadpan. Like Meg said, he likes to see the terror shaking his victims, overtaking them; to control them and have sole power. And what’s more powerful than having someone’s faith in your hands? It’s a good thing I can’t experience fear that easily.

He studies my empty eyes and relaxed pose. He opens his mouth to say something, but the loud bang of the door hitting the wall cuts him off. Polsner quickly shifts behind me, wrapping the chain swiftly around my neck.

As soon as I see who came for me, all my protective instincts abruptly turn on. I yank furiously against the ties and push uncaringly against the metal chain around my neck. The primal need to reach Michael is tearing me in two.

Michael's eyes quickly glance at the body on the floor and then at me. I can see horror, panic, and worry swirling in his gaze, but he gives me a stilted nod before focusing on Polsner.

Motherfuckingshit! Why the fuck is Michael here? And where are the others?

"Dr. Caldwell, so nice of you to join us." I can feel the Cheshire Cat smile in Polsner's voice. With my hands still restrained and the damn chain around my neck, I can't do much.

"Let him go." Michael's voice is commanding. His fists are balled up so tightly the knuckles are white. He takes a step toward us, but stops when Polsner forces the chain back, pulling it tighter against my throat.

"And why would I do that?"

"Because he doesn't look like your brother," Michael replies.

His brother?

Polsner's grip loosens slightly. "You did your homework, Doctor. You are incredibly skilled, as well as nosy. But how did you find me?"

"Tracked your phone," Michael replies.

"Really? I'm intrigued. That takes skills." Polsner's praise sounds shallow.

“I have friends,” he vaguely says. “He died very young, your brother.” Even though I’m enraged by Michael’s recklessness, I have to admit that he’s doing great at keeping Polsner engaged.

“You sound sorry. All that softness.” Polsner sighs. “Medical examiner is definitely not the job for you, Doctor.”

Ignoring Polsner’s words, Michael tries again. “He’s not what you want. Let him go.”

“And what do I want, pray tell?” Polsner asks him.

“Someone to recreate your brother’s death with. Someone who looks more like him, just like the other victims.” He pauses, glancing down at me and then back up. “Someone like me.”

“Fuck no!” I snarl, furiously twisting my wrists as I writhe on the chair.

Polsner tightens his grasp. I can feel every single metal bead sinking into my skin, taking away my air supply.

“Take me! His death won’t give you the same satisfaction,” Michael pleads.

“I don’t know. Mr. Bear-Stone has been insufferable from day one. I’d rather enjoy killing him.” Polsner laughs near my ear.

I start to see black dots in front of my eyes. And all I feel is anger and repulsion. I can’t fucking die at the hands of this prick. And I can’t leave Michael alone again. Unprotected. I won’t let anybody hurt him ever again.

“He’s a millionaire. If you kill him with your distinctive murder weapon, they will hunt you down and find you in the end.”

“The police?” He laughs derisively, loosening his grip on the chain. I can finally suck in some much-needed air.

“I can easily take care of that from the inside.” *‘Like I’ve been doing.’* Polsner’s unuttered words are still loud in the room.

“Not talking about the police.” Michael’s stare doesn’t falter. His piercing blue eyes are firmly on Polsner. “If you let him go... outside, I’ll do whatever you say.”

Over my dead body! I’m about to growl again when Michael’s words register. That was weird phrasing. Why did he pause and say ‘outside?’ He glances at me and then quickly to my right. At the window? Are my brothers out there? Is Uri prepping old Betsy?

If Michael came with the others... They are all dead for letting him try to save me without even a weapon. Rami must have made him wear an earpiece. Which means he’s listening to everything we are saying. Maybe even telling Michael what to say.

The armrests protest again under my arms and a plan starts forming inside my head.

Michael’s life isn’t something I want to risk. Ever. But I need this chain off my neck to eliminate the threat.

“Don’t you want to feel it again? That same thrill? Having your brother so close you can hear his frantic heartbeats?” My voice is strained, but still tempting, judging by Polsner’s unnatural stillness. All his attention is on me now.

I give him an alluring image. “He’s panting, trying to breathe, but spine-chilling fear is making it worse. Black spots form in front of his eyes when the oxygen can’t reach his brain. He’s terrorized. Knows the end is coming. Do you like it when he gasps? When his hands scratch blindly at his throat trying to loosen the metal chain sinking in his neck? When he gurgles his last sound before going limp against you? Can you feel the life leaving his body?” I try to describe from experience with the donors, exaggerating a bit.

Michael's eyes are studying me. For once, I can't read him. But now is not the time to think about that. I need to focus on Polsner.

"That was such an electrifying ride to memory lane. Almost like you were there, Mr. Bear-Stone." He moans, and the chain loosens even more. "Do you have a good imagination, or have you felt that kind of thrill before? I wonder."

"Does it really matter?" Michael answers for me. "You want to keep killing your brother over and over..."

Polsner cuts him off, "Because he was such a fucking pain with his stupid condition. He was so fucking fragile, whimpering and shivering. Every time he bled, we needed to inject him with a clotting substance. Until we were broke. My father left because of that, and working two jobs killed my mother. Protecting him was the death of her. I promised her I'd take care of him. And I did. Oh, I did. He fucking deserved all I gave him. Just like the others." The chain slides away from my neck, but I hear the unmistakable sound of a gun being unholstered.

I don't want Polsner to accidentally fire a bullet. And I'm not sure Uri is out there with his rifle. There's only one thing I can do. But I need him closer to me.

"You really got lucky at every turn." I let out a loud puff of air. I look down at my hand, and when Michael's eyes follow mine, I point at the door. I'm signaling him to move toward the exit, but he just stares back at me. So stubborn!

"Lucky?" Polsner says between gritted teeth.

"Definitely," I add.

"I bet you made a mess when you killed your brother." I almost snicker at Polsner.

“A-a mess?” He takes a step closer to me, wrapping a hand around my neck and cocking his gun, aiming it at Michael.

The moment I see the black muzzle appear in the corner of my eye, I jump into action. Gripping the armrests with both my hands, I bend forward, lifting the chair up with me and snapping my head back. My skull crashes into Polsner’s face. I hear more than feel the crunch of his nose breaking. But I don’t have time to enjoy it, since he’s still holding the gun.

I feel the blood pumping inside my veins when I fist my still-bound hands and turn on my side—chair and everything. I slam against him, knocking him to the ground. I go down too, falling on top of him. I hear his *oomph* and then the sound of wood cracking under me as I roll off him.

An acute pain hits my side, but I grit my teeth against it. I see the gun sliding on the floor, still too close to Polsner’s hand. A loud shot breaks the silence, and the window shatters as a bullet hits it. Another bullet hits the pistol on the floor, pushing it further away from Polsner. Uri is outside firing old Betsy.

The chair is broken; the armrest finally gave way, and my arms are free to do some damage. I shift till I’m completely untied and grab a long, jagged piece of wood. Pulling myself up, I push a knee hard on Polsner’s balls while pressing the wood across his throat.

He grumbles in pain, which only makes me increase the pressure with my knee. I punch his face over and over and again, until my knuckles hurt, and he looks almost unconscious.

Then I slide the small knife out of my boot and, with a flick of my wrist, I let the blade come out.

“You tried to take what’s mine. Now you’ll pay the consequences.” All my humanity leeches from my voice as I whisper to his bloody face. But I’m

fucking tired of people wanting to take Michael from me.

“Wait,” Michael utters. He’s standing near me. I lower the hand holding the knife and straighten my upper body, just in time to see his fist hitting Polsner right in the jaw.

“Fuck!” my boyfriend swears, waving his aching hand in the air. I need to teach him how to defend himself. Because the sight of him landing a punch is so damn arousing.

I hear footsteps behind me, and then Rague’s voice. “This place is a fucking labyrinth.”

“Where the fuck are we?” I ask. I can see the rest of the wide room now, but still have no clue. The wall has more windows, but they’re all boarded up. Huge-ass pieces of machinery fill the rest of the space in the back.

“An old factory.”

“Raph, move away.” Michael’s sudden hard tone, one I’ve never heard before, makes me turn to look at him.

He must have picked up the gun from the floor, because he’s holding it with both hands, aiming it at Polsner. His arms are trembling, but his finger is steady on the trigger.

“What are you going to do, babe?” I ask Michael, sending a look Rague’s way, silently asking him to keep an eye on Polsner. Slowly, I lift myself up.

“He wanted to kill you, Raph. He didn’t care about...” He chokes on his words. “I’m not going to let that happen again,” Michael grits out, his voice bouncing off the walls.

“He can’t harm us anymore, piglet.” I point at the unconscious body on the floor.

“I’ll make certain of it.” Michael is still staring angrily at Polsner.

“And I’d let you do it, but a bullet in the head would be too easy on him. I have other plans, babe.”

He frowns and finally looks at me. “Other plans?”

“I’m going to show you what we do to people like him.” I take a step toward him, and then another.

“Are you criminals?” Michael asks, his face all adorably scrunched up. But he’s still here with me. Not running away. Like I’d ever let him do that, my non-conscience voice reminds me.

“Fuck no!” Rague replies. He’s securing Polsner’s hands together, using the ties the fucker had on me.

“Why is Rami saying it depends on how I look at it?” Michael lowers the gun, tapping on the earpiece tucked in his ear.

I cup his face, feeling relief engulf me at the contact with his smooth skin. I let myself get lost in his deep, blue eyes. “Why did you put yourself in danger, Michael?” I scold him.

He curls a hand around mine, and retorts with fire, “Do you really think I’d do nothing when you were about to lose your life?”

“I had everything under control.”

“Oh, sure. I could see that. Especially with your hands tied and a chain around your neck.” The sarcasm is thick in his voice.

“Don’t ever do it again. Ever! I told you I can’t lose you again,” I finish with a desperate growl.

“Rami, Rague, and Uri were covering me.” He’s trying to placate me, but that just reminds me I have a bone to pick with them.

I answer with a grunt.

“Here.” Uri walks into the room, rifle on his shoulder, and tosses me an earpiece.

I put it on before saying, “Who’s idea was it to send Michael in here alone?”

“He threatened to cut my balls in my sleep, Raph,” Rami whines.

“Like he’d do that,” I counter angrily.

“Try me,” Michael huffs, making my dick twitch.

“Relax. Old Betsy was ready to take Polsner out.” Uri pats his rifle. He’s the fucking shit with it. Can hit a two-thousand-yard target with a headwind.

“Why didn’t you do it then?” Michael complains.

“And take the fun out of Raph’s hands? I want to continue with living my life, Mike.” Uri snorts.

“What the fuck does that even mean?” Michael waves the hand holding the gun, and suddenly a shot booms inside the room.

“Shit!” Uri curses.

“Ahhhh!” Polsner screams. A red spot starts forming on his thigh.

“What happened?” I hear Meg’s worried voice in my ear. Is she here? She’s rarely part of our side business, unless we need a mental evaluation of a donor.

“Michael shot the fucker in the leg,” Rague replies.

Rami enters the room panting. “Nice one,” he breathes out, handing a small case containing a syringe to Rague. He’s going to drug Polsner to make sure he’ll stay knocked out on the way to the base.

“It was an accident. Fuck!” Michael drops the pistol—which thankfully doesn’t go off again—and presses his lips together. A half-sob slips from between them. “Why am I always this fucking emotional! Damn it,” he swears, shaking his hands. He looks agitated, on the verge of... crying.

“What do you need, babe? Tell me.” I’ll give him whatever he asks for. I just want him to calm down.

“Hug me, you asshole!” he yells at me.

I hear a snort from behind me, and I make a promise to myself to punch Rami in the face as soon as I can.

I pull Michael in, and while I still have no idea how to comfort him, the idea of being the only one he wants it from gives me a sense of purpose.

He nuzzles his face into my t-shirt and wraps his arms around my waist so tightly I feel pain piercing my side. I flinch, but I don’t care. Whatever he needs, I’m here to give it to him.

“What is it?” he asks me. Instead of answering I kiss his head.

“Who’s the dead guy on the floor?” Uri asks.

“Detective Diaz,” I say.

“That complicates things,” Uri adds.

“And to think, we almost thought *he* was the Rope Killer.” Rami shakes his head.

“Why?” I look at him.

“Serena found a link between him and the last victim, the therapist. Diaz had gone to see him several times.”

Uri checks his phone, probably texting Sari. “Was he a patient?”

“That’s what we thought. That he became a patient to get close to the therapist before killing him. But on our way here, Meg called to let us know Diaz didn’t fit the killer profile. But Polsner...”

“Is she here?” I ask.

“I’m at home,” Meg answers. “I asked Serena to look for a few things, and she was able to find out about Detective Polsner’s past. His father was abusive. There was a report—which was later withdrawn—from a doctor at

St. Clarita's Hospital. He found multiple wounds and bruises on a twelve-year-old Polsner. His brother was in and out of hospitals as well because of his hemophilia, but there was no report of abuse on him."

"The father probably couldn't touch him because of his blood disorder. He'd have bled to death after a beating," Michael offers.

"Fast-forward ten years, the father disappeared. Polsner reported his brother missing a week after his mother died. The police never found him."

"Because he killed him," Uri interjects.

"Probably his first kill," Meg says. "But it wasn't enough. Polsner's need to kill is pushed by his craving to keep punishing his brother. One time wasn't enough, because he believes his brother is the reason for his shitty life."

"Why did he wait this long? At the time of his brother's death, he was twenty-two. Why let more than eight years pass?" Michael asks, moving his head back from my chest. He looks more like himself now.

"He enrolled into the police academy at that time. Maybe he wanted to lay low, or found something to fill his time," Meg suggests.

"Or he never stopped killing, and we don't know about it." Rague is standing near Detective Diaz's body, frowning at it.

"Detective Diaz started going to the therapist because he had doubts about Polsner. Why he chose that therapist, we don't know. Clover —" a very skilled thief we work with sometimes "—found a bunch of private files in the therapist's home under a floorboard. Diaz was thrown off by Polsner's attitude. He described it as violent, evasive, odd at times. But in the last month, Diaz was actually following him. Maybe that's how he got himself killed," Rami finishes.

"It's all very interesting, but we need to fix this mess. We can talk more about everything later," Rami adds, looking straight at me and Michael.

“I have bleach in my car,” Rague says. “But a fire would do a better job.”

“You can’t burn Detective Diaz! He was a good cop. His family needs to bury him, not wonder all their life what happened to him.” Michael fists my shirt, looking in turn at all of us with so much pleading in his eyes I can’t seem to resist.

“Okay, babe, I have an idea.” My manipulative brain is in action.

Uri nods our way. “I’ll put old Betsy to sleep and then come help with the plan... whatever it is.”

“Meg. Do you still have the therapist’s file Clover stole?”

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Chapter 18

MICHAEL

“Are you sure you want to see this?” Sari asks from my side.

Am I?

The sun will be rising soon. I’m tired. I slept only three hours before all hell broke loose. Detective Polsner is the Rope Killer. I still trying to wrap my head around it.

My mind goes back to an hour ago.

After securing a drugged Detective Polsner in the back of the infamous black van and moving Diaz’s body, Rague torched the place, looking all delighted. We didn’t stay for the spectacle, leaving the factory in Rami’s fancy electric car. He instructed Serena to take care of our digital footprints—whatever those are—while I checked Raph’s body. He winced again when I got closer to him in the back seat, and I found out he got hurt with a piece of wood when he tackled Polsner. A long cut under his abdomen, which looked fucking painful, even though Raph seemed okay with it.

“I’m fine, babe. Had much worse.”

His words made me pause. “Are you talking about when we were kids, or in recent years?” I swallowed hard, bracing myself for his reply. But I needed to know.

His fingers sank into my waist, his grip bruising. Was he afraid I’d jump out of a moving car? Or maybe he thought I’d panic again, like when I accidentally shot a gun—for the first time in my damn life, I might add.

Hitting Polsner had been the only silver lining. Even though my hand still hurt like a bitch. But I was glad Raph stopped me from killing him. I didn’t know what came over me, but I had been ready to actually end a life. I felt furious and frightened of losing Raph. Would I have pulled the trigger? I looked at Raph and the answer came easily.

Yes. I’d do anything to protect him.

I did kill someone already. James Crowley. His name was written in the police file Meg showed me. It was self-defense. I was only a kid. And I can't remember it, though.

“You already know the answer to that question, Michael.” His voice was calm and sobering. “My first kill was out of revenge. My second as well.”

“Your foster parents,” I whispered, remembering how they’d sold him. My hand lifted on its own and rested on his chest. I needed the contact; the feel of his heart beating under my palm silenced the running thoughts trying to overwhelm me. Rami, for once, was mute in the front seat, and his quietness made the air inside the car somehow heavier.

“I found out that in the years I spent with Meg and Linda, they sold more children, who suffered much worse fates than me. So, I took care of the two shitheads myself. And it felt good.”

I didn't know when I had closed my eyes, but they slid open when I heard his last statement.

"Linda gave me a code—principles, if you prefer—to follow to conduct myself in the world so I don't get into trouble. She also taught me how to become an expert at blending. I camouflage myself every time I go out. I pretend to be millionaire Raphael Bear-Stone, young, innovative president of Bear-Stone Labs and playboy."

"Playboy," I repeated.

"That's what my piglet gets upset about?" He smiled fondly at me. "Ex-playboy," he amended. "I like when you get possessive of me." Raph's familiar knuckle-brushing against my cheek helped calm me down. What he said before really shook me. I needed to know more.

"Camouflage?" I asked him.

"It's the craftiest nature trick. And it's a game I like to play. Fooling people is fun. Connecting with another human being... I found it boring." I turned rigid in his arms, but Raph held me close. "Not with you, Michael. I never had to fake anything with you."

"Because I'm yours?"

"Yes, no escape from me, babe." The sweet smile fell from his lips. "I know how to blend in, but the trauma caused by the captivity was too rooted inside of me. It turned into a darkness that wanted to be fed. And it didn't go away. It only grew with time. So, Linda found a way to channel it." The gold speckles in his eyes sparked every time the car passed under a streetlamp, turning him into an unearthly dark angel.

"How?" I whispered.

"She turned it into a weapon. A weapon I used to punish people who escape the law or are good at hiding from it."

“Punish?”

“Kill. We kill bad people who hurt decent ones,” he stated.

I studied his solemn face as I tried to process what he told me.

“Kill?”

“Terminate, execute, put down. We eradicate vicious murderers, rapists, people who enjoy hurting others... evil.”

“Like the angels of wrath?” I could feel my brows hit my hairline, but I didn’t move away from him. I didn’t feel afraid, just so damn shocked.

“Irony, right? I don’t think Meg had that in mind when she gave us those names.” He smirked, but I didn’t share the mirth.

“Let me get this straight. You and your brothers kill people...”

“Shitheads,” he corrected me.

“Like paladins of justice?”

“Not a chance in hell!” Rami mumbled, scoffing from the front seat.

“I can only speak for myself, babe. There’s no justice involved. It’s a need to silence the darkness inside of me. Just like you and blood. Meg and Linda pointed this need toward good deeds... of a sort.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I didn’t know what to say. Of all the scenarios I’d created in my mind in the last few days, this was the unthinkable one.

“I thought you were criminals. Like one of those mob families or whatever they’re called.”

Rami cackled, making me feel damn stupid for my assumption. “Oh, shut up! What the hell was I supposed to think?” I barked at him.

Raph squeezed my waist once again, turning my attention to him. His eyes darkened. “I would have become a criminal. An assassin. You don’t remember what they did to us, Michael. The ugliness they put inside of me

needs an outlet. I won't lie and tell you I do it out of some sort of honorable calling. I don't. I like to kill them. I like to make them suffer. To see their blood spilling. The fact that they did something bad and need to pay for it, just like my foster parents did, is a plus." His voice was firm, void of any emotion.

He could have easily faked it, but he chose not to with me. He'd always been honest with me—apart from the omissions. And now he was making himself vulnerable. He was putting all his family at risk, trusting me with their secret.

"You..." The word came out like a squeak. So, I cleared my voice and tried again. "You said you have a code?"

"Kids and pets always have to be protected. Be one hundred percent sure the kill is deserved. Ask your brothers for help. No revenge kills alone; emotional unpredictability can turn messy. Polsner needs to die."

His last statement didn't scare me. A part of me actually agreed with him. Was it crazy? Maybe. But crazy was also having a police detective killing people instead of protecting them. Those bodies were laid on my table prematurely. Maybe their death could have been avoided if Raph and the others had intervened earlier.

Still shaken up, but confident in my decision, I wrapped my hands behind his neck. "And I will be with you, too," I told him, feeling my gut burning with belonging and love for this complex man.

"Yeah?" The smile he gave me was the crooked one I always felt powerless against.

"Wooo-hoo!" Rami cheered, stopping the car in front of the gates to Meg's house.

Once inside the garage, instead of walking to the entrance, we went down to a secret basement.

“Welcome to the base,” Rami said. Everything would have felt like a dream, without Raph’s warm hand in mine anchoring me down...

“We could go to my lab,” Sari suggests, his voice draws me out of my cluttered brain. My silence must have seemed like a cry for help to him.

“You could help me with the samples and...” Sari’s words are cut off.

“Michael.”

A petite blonde woman approaches me quickly and engulfs me in a tight hug.

“Linda?” I recognize her voice from the phone call.

“Let me look at you.” Her sharp, light blue eyes travel up and down my body, studying me closely. “Such a hot little dish. Now I know why Raph is smitten.”

I feel a blush reach my cheeks.

“So, I guess the cat is out of the damn bag.” She points to the room behind us, where Polsner has been stripped naked and tied to a chair. The room is covered in green plastic, there’s a hose on the back, and a sink with a bucket lying on top. A long table full of knives and other sharp weapons is in front of me. The glass wall is the only thing separating me from it.

“Yeah,” I puff out. Polsner is still unconscious, while Raph is taking samples of blood and tissues from him. Sari explained to me the donors’ bit, and how Rami falsifies the samples’ origins. I’m astonished at how well-oiled this *family side business* is. They help people twice. Once by eliminating evil, and again by using the samples to find cures and remedies.

“Good,” Linda says.

Like Meg, she must be in her sixties. And although at first sight she looks cute and fragile, a silent deadliness exudes out of her, and an air of cunning. “Justice is blind. But that’s why it misses a few targets here and there. Karma takes too long in my opinion. That’s why we have the FUNS room,” she tells me.

“FUNS room?”

“Fucked Up Nasty Shitheads room,” Rami explains. A snort leaves my lips without me wanting it to.

“Seriously?” Gabe appears behind us, dressed smartly in his blue suit even though it’s Four AM. Do lawyers ever sleep? “That’s the Donors room.”

“If Linda calls it the FUNS room, it’s official. Suck it, Gabe!” Rami smiles triumphantly.

Polsner is still out. Looking at him now, naked and restrained, so defenseless, I can’t believe he killed six people in cold blood.

“He won’t be able to see us once he wakes up,” Meg says, coming next to me. “It’s a two-way mirror.”

I give a stilted nod, turning my eyes back on the FUNS room.

“Thank you for helping me with Polsner, back at the factory,” I tell her. I see a small smile appear on her mouth from the corner of my eye. It’s going to take time to go back to what we were. But I’m sure we’ll get there, eventually.

“Our alibis are already in place. Serena sent you all a reminder of where you’ve been all night,” Rami tells us. Everybody nods. Wow, they sound like professional spies. While a shudder rolls down my anxious self.

“Where are the others?” Meg asks.

“Rague and Uri went to Mr. Thomas’s house to leave Detective Diaz’s body there and stage his death. They’ll place the file the therapist filled with

Diaz's doubts about his partner—plus some new entries saying he also thought his partner was the Rope Killer. They covered it in Detective Polsner's fingerprints. The gun Polsner used to shoot Diaz will be next to the body. It will look like Polsner found the file under the therapist's floor and Diaz, who was following him, caught him in the act. Polsner shot him and ran. The police will never find Polsner, but at least Diaz will be a hero, and his family will know that," I reply.

"And Raph agreed to that?" Gabe asks.

"Yeah, why wouldn't he?" I ask. Rami explained to me that they stage the crime scene at times, instead of making the donor disappear. It steers the investigations in the wrong direction and helps to keep the police away from the family side business.

"Because Raph usually doesn't listen to anyone and does as he pleases," Linda says, smiling at me.

"Not with me. I mean, he can be bossy, but..." I stop talking since everybody is looking strangely at me.

"Do you remember our last Friday together?" Meg suddenly asks me. "We talked about the idea of a vigilante eliminating evil from the streets."

Holy shit! Was she testing me? I look at her, but her eyes remain focused straight ahead. On Raph.

"And do you remember what you said?" she asks me.

I swallow, searching for my answer. "That the vigilante should be careful. If his motivations are dark, he could get lost in them. Turn into the same evil he's trying to eradicate."

"He needs an anchor that keeps him on the right path." She finally looks at me, and I know she's talking about Raph and me. I'm his anchor.

My eyes fall on Gabe. He's looking at me with what seems like longing filling his eyes. I must be mistaken, because when I blink, his gaze is as cold as ever.

"Bets are on. Hundred each," Linda says.

"Always such high stakes," Rami complains.

"Bets?" I ask, looking around and realizing how all of them have created a shield around me. Sari and Meg are at my sides, while Linda and Rami are standing behind me. Even Gabe, with his six-foot-three presence, makes me feel protected.

"It has to be his hands. He tried to strangle Raph," Rami says.

"Dick. Raph thought Polsner wanted to fuck Michael," Gabe utters, looking at his phone.

"Are they betting on what Raph is going to... cut first?" I ask Sari.

He nods like his brothers are casually talking about the weather. Fucking unbelievable.

"Raph will use him as an axe-throwing target," Linda chimes in.

"That's his favorite weapon," Sari agrees. My boyfriend has a favorite weapon.

Meg remains silent. From what I gather, she isn't usually part of all this. Is she here for me?

"Polsner's eyes," I blurt out. When in Rome...

Everybody turns my way, making me uncomfortable. More than I already am. Standing in front of a torture chamber. Waiting for the torture to start. While taking part in a macabre bet. So damn surreal. And yet... I've never felt more at ease.

"Why?" Sari asks me, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“I heard Polsner told Raph he had a claim on me because he saw me first. And since Raph is very possessive...” I let my words trail off.

“Fuck a duck,” Rami mumbles.

“Oh, it’s starting,” Linda says, full of excitement. She pushes the button on the intercom to let us hear.

“Wake up, Sloppy Killer. Let the fun begin,” Raph hisses at a still-disoriented Polsner.

I can see he’s trying to open his eyes, and from his mouth, a trail of drool runs down his chin. What the hell did they give him to knock him out like this?

Raph is holding a drill, turning it on and off, on and off. The sound creeps me out. His demeanor is menacing, I can feel his coldness spreading all around, even though there’s a glass wall dividing us. He walks to Polsner, and with his free hand, slaps him hard on the face.

“Where am I?” the detective asks.

“Pre-Hell,” Rami replies, leaning into the intercom. Polsner turns his eyes toward the glass wall, his gaze shifting around, not focusing on any of us.

“Who’s there?” His voice is hoarse, and he’s pulling against the tight restraints on his wrists and ankles.

“My family likes to watch when I work.” Polsner looks baffled by Raph’s reply. My boyfriend is studying him like a predator would its prey.

“Don’t like when it’s you tied up?” Raph smirks. “And before you try anything, the rope and the chair are made of stainless steel, and bolted to the floor.”

“Why am I naked?” His face is turning red from anger, or maybe embarrassment.

“So that I can clearly see the damage I’ll cause you,” Raph deadpans, pointing the drill toward him.

“You’re insane.”

“You are the one killing innocent people because they help you relive the ecstasy you felt when you killed your sick bother. I, on the other hand, provide a cleaning service to society.” Raph’s controlled demeanor is turning me on. Never thought I’d feel this exhilarated watching him threaten a killer with a yellow drill.

“Service? You just enjoy the violence!” Polsner retorts angrily.

“It’s not the violence that turns me on. It’s the blood.” Raph clears that up. Fuck that’s hot. I’m a bit scared by my thoughts right now, but I don’t care. And that feels good as well. To embrace this part of me.

“And the subsequent kill,” Gabe adds, for only us to hear.

“So, go on. Let’s end this,” Polsner cockily says. But I can see the slight shake of his hands.

“End? You think I’ll just sink this drill into your heart?” Raph growls, bending down to the detective’s eye level. “You tried to hurt Michael. Wanted to take him away from me. And no one, *no one* touches him.” His thunderous, possessive tone makes me shiver. I feel an urge to submit to him. “I’ll carve your heart out and squeeze it between my fingers while I watch the life slowly fade from your eyes.”

“You’re all talk and no acti... Ahhhh!” Polsner’s scream booms through the intercom.

I keep watching with a mix of fascination and shock. Raph’s drill twists inside Polsner’s knee. Thick red blood gushes out of the wound, making my inner monster sing in delight. It calls to me, but I never craved the rush that came with killing another human being. In this case though, I am on Raph’s

side. If I knew there was someone out there who wanted to hurt a person I loved, I'd want to see them suffer too.

"That's what we do," Gabe tells me. I stare at him for a few seconds, not realizing I'm not uttering any of the thoughts bouncing around in my head. He continues, "We help eradicate evil. And that temporarily satisfies the urge." Urge, darkness, inner monster, need... So many words to describe the same thing.

"It's a win-win," Rami adds.

"Can you handle it?" Gabe asks me, using his monotone voice.

What was the lesser evil? Allowing a bad person to keep hurting innocents while waiting for the police to gather enough proof, or becoming judge and jury by eliminating that bad person to protect them? The answer seems pretty clear at the moment. Perhaps because of the fucking day and night I'm still having. Or maybe it's the sight of blood dripping on the green plastic covering that fogs my judgment. Or the fact that in this case a member of the police is the bad person.

"I-I can," I say, feeling a little flustered under Gabe's intent gaze. It's like he's trying to see behind my eyes, into the chaotic thoughts whirling inside my head.

But after a short moment, he seems satisfied by my reply. He turns back to the show.

The detective whimpers. His head falls forward, I can almost hear the cracking sound of his teeth grinding against the pain. Raph leaves the metal bit inside the knee and turns toward the table again to grab a new one. When he lifts his eyes, they are not cold, as I expect. They're filled with blazing fury. Raph grabs a bigger bit, pushing it inside the drill. He turns toward Polsner again.

“This is a revenge kill, why is Raph alone in there?,” Linda asks.

My heart starts beating faster. The code. What was it about revenge kills? Never alone. So why is he? I don’t want him to be. Ever again. Not even... in this case.

“This kill is too rough. It lacks finesse,” Sari says.

“Raph is usually glacial, completely dispassionate with his donors. He’s an artist. He likes to vary his methods,” Gabe confirms.

An artist at killing people? *Bad people*, I remind myself.

“I’m going in with him.” Rami’s voice makes me frown even more.

“He needs his anchor,” Meg whispers. I’m already stopping Rami and entering the room before she finishes speaking.

My boyfriend looks at me with rage in his eyes. And although I see a hint of that softness that he always aims at me, the force of his fury is stronger.

“Doctor, you keep surprising me.” Polsner’s voice is strained, probably because of the drill bit still sticking out of his knee. And the bullet in his thigh. And the broken nose and bloody face. “All I killed were social outcasts and delinquents. Nobody will miss them. Some would even thank me for it. While you are torturing a police detective.”

Raph places the drill near Polsner’s side and turns it on. The detective’s howls and cries are so loud I can hear them over the sound.

I’m a medical examiner; I can eat my dinner while watching a recorded autopsy. My stomach is made of cast-iron. But seeing Raph lost in his anger makes me sick. He turns the drill off and slides the long metal bit out, making Polsner gurgle something unintelligible. When he positions the drill on the detective’s cheek, I place my hand on his arm to stop him.

I usually lose my sanity in Raph’s intense green eyes easily. They are soul-sucking. Even now, filled with fire, they are pulling me under his spell.

Demanding me to give in.

But I've been fighting with myself since Raph told me about all this. Finding excuses, searching for reasons, giving him and his brothers the benefit of the doubt. And now... now is the moment of truth. The moment when I choose what path to follow.

So, I turn to Polsner. "Do you know what Ling Chi is?" My voice sounds less firm than I want, and a whole lot more trembly.

"Fuck you," he croaks.

Raph turns rigid next to me, but I squeeze his arm. He lowers the drill, regarding me with uncertainty.

"Ling Chi, also known as 'slow slicing' or 'death by a thousand cuts' was a method of torturous execution practiced in China. The condemned was tied to a post, and bits of skin and limbs were gradually removed one by one, usually culminating in a final cut to the heart or decapitation," I explain. My love for blood took me to dark corners once or twice.

"It was used as early as the 10th century, and continued for nearly a thousand years," Sari's voice comes through the intercom.

The small smirk that appears on Raph's lips doesn't take away his anger, but it makes him look more like my psycho boyfriend.

"Wow," I hear Rami saying.

"Want to try?" I ask Raph.

He grabs my nape and pulls my mouth to his in a searing kiss. The fact that a killer is a few feet away from us, as is most of our family, makes me pull back earlier than I want. He was right that day at the morgue, stranger things did happen.

"God, you are sick fucks!" Polsner snarls.

“Raph was right. You got lucky at every turn. Drugged and strangled your victims from behind because you’re a coward. Perfect crime, my ass,” I tell him, just to ruffle his feathers.

“I maneuvered everybody like puppets! Diaz was so easy. *I* sent him to that therapist. Straight to my prey!”

“And they both were suspicious about you. You were too cocky.” I admonish him.

“Diaz was a nosy, dumb fuck. Shouldn’t have started a secret investigation on me!” Polsner spits blood on the floor, too close to my sneaker.

“He was a good cop.”

“You are blind. I did the same to you,” Polsner tells me with annoyance.

“Why do you think the department chose you out of so many medical examiners?”

I feel a shudder roll down my spine. All these months... he’s been waiting to pounce on me. If Raph hadn’t come back into my life, I’d be one of the Rope Killer’s victims by now.

“I made it happen, you fool.” The detective chuckles.

“Who’s the fool now?” Raph quips before drilling Polsner’s other knee. The rolling blood hypnotizes me. I don’t want to touch; the crimson sight is enough. Raph’s blood is the only one that I want to taste.

“Fuck!” Polsner screams, panting like an angry bull. “You think you’re better than me? You are killers too. You are even worse with your green room and torture table.”

Raph has moved slightly in front of me, taking a protective pose and pushing me a few steps backward. That’s when I’m certain of my choice. Because he’ll always put my well-being first.

“Sometimes, bad guys make the best good guys,” I say.

Raph places the drill on the table and switches it with an axe. He swiftly swings it in the air. Blood splatters, and I hear the sickening thump of the head hit the floor and roll. But my eyes are stuck on the rest of the body.

“Fuck yeah!” I hear Rami whistle. “Sometimes bad guys make the best good guys,” he says, trying to imitate my voice.

“I heard it somewhere. I think it fits well.” My mouth is moving, but my head is blank.

I jerk a bit when two warm palms cup my face. “Piglet.” Raph’s breath hits my lips. His green gaze is deep and clear, and I give him a fragile, trembling smile before covering my mouth with my hand as my eyes fill with tears.

“Fuck. Babe, you’re upset. Was it too much?” he asks, looking... *worried?*

“Or did you really want to try the death by a hundred cuts?”

“A thousand,” Gabe corrects him.

Raph flips his finger at the glass wall, which is clear now. I can see all of them gathered there, looking at us.

“Great job, you guys,” Linda cheers us on. And although I should be horrified by what just happened, I can’t stop smiling.

It starts with a snort, that soon turns into a hysterical laugh. I feel fucking overwhelmed by everything. In the last two weeks, I was attacked twice. My office was trashed. I discovered I was experimented on when I was a kid and taken away from my real fucked-up family. A serial killer entered my life with the intent to murder me. My boyfriend was kidnapped, and I had to save him. I shot my first gun. I helped stage the death of a cop and I just backed my boyfriend into killing the Rope Killer.

Raph pushes me to his chest and keeps whispering nonsense in my ear, making me slowly calm down. He’s getting good at this.

“I’m okay,” I croak, swallowing audibly.

“Yes, you are.” I can see Meg nodding on the other side of the glass.

“We’re all insane in one way or another. Debauched as well,” Rami adds with a smirk.

“Are you talking about your kinky online history?” Uri halts behind Meg, planting a kiss on her head. Rague follows him, looking inside the FUNS room. “Head off? Shit, I missed the best part.”

“It was epic.” Linda smiles brightly.

“Not bad.” Gabe shrugs.

“Fucking C-3PO, that was Highlander shit right there!” Rami mutters.

“Highlander used a sword. But damn, I really wanted to see it done with an axe.” Uri sounds really bugged from missing it as well.

The banter keeps going among the family when Raph asks me, “Are you okay?”

I lift my head and try to give him a small smile.

“I feel... overloaded.” I let out a long sigh. “But I know I’ll be okay eventually. With you.”

He nods and gives me an open-mouthed, all-tongue, short-but-swoon-worthy kiss.

“I promise you, from now on I’ll always put you first,” Raph whispers on my lips. I breathe his words inside my chest and tuck them deep, close to my heart.

“Go take a shower. Uri and Rague will clean this up.” Linda has both her thumbs up. I really like her. Also, I don’t want to think about what the cleanup entails.

“Why me?” I hear Uri complain, and then he lets out an *ouch*!

“Shower and then let’s go home.” Raph directs me toward a door on the right.

“Yours or mine?” I ask.

“Ours.”

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Epilogue

RAPHAEL

I feel fucking alive. When was the last time I've had this feeling? Ah! This morning, when I fucked Michael against the kitchen counter.

And now? He is trying to suck my cock dry. "Yeah, like that. Fucking love your mouth."

He swirls his tongue around my shaft again, bobbing his blond head along my length. My hard dick slides in and out of his swollen mouth, and I grunt, fisting a hand through his short hair.

"Take me deep. Let me feel your throat," I growl, pushing my palm firmly on the wall.

He moans and slides me back in. He gags, spit gathering around his mouth. Such a fucking vision, under me on the bed. My big thighs on both sides of his head. Mouth stretched with cock. My dick is not huge, but thick, and sure as fuck above average. Relaxing, he lets me in again, and this time I

slip down his throat. I let out a rumbling snarl. So warm and wet. So fucking good.

It doesn't take much to have his nose pressed into my black pubes. Damn, this is the life, having my boyfriend begging me to fuck his face.

I start slow, letting him savor my cock. I know he loves to feel the weight on his tongue, the width burning the corners of his mouth, my precum dripping down his throat.

My hips keep a steady rhythm as I turn my head back, my gaze traveling downward. His abs flex as he humps the air, his red-tipped cock hard and ready to burst. I focus back on his full mouth. The sting of his nails digging into my thighs almost makes me come. I pull out, and he quickly nudges his nose under my balls, burying his face in my crotch and taking a deep breath.

His eyes are closed, and he makes some sort of choking noise as he grinds his nose in deeper.

"I could spend the rest of the night right here, bathing in your smell," he mumbles, turning on the possessive caveman in me.

I tilt his head up, pressing my thumb under his chin. He's watching me, his eyes hooded as he takes me in, looming over him. I've fucked every hole in his body on this bed multiple times in the last month, and still, I want more.

Every time I see his heavy-lidded blue eyes filled with need, his parted lips shining with spit and cum, I feel the primal need to show him once again who he belongs to. And how he owns every part of me.

I slide down and let our mouths come together, while a shiver rocks his body against mine. He's always so eager for more. I decide to tease him a little and touch him everywhere. The rough scratch of his light stubble, the soft, almost white hair on his pecs, the long line of his neck and the

smoothness of his pale shoulders. I glide a hand up over Michael's flat stomach, his perfect bellybutton, and the short trail of hair beneath it. Then up to his pecs, over his chest hair again—love the feel of it—and stiff nipples, finally resting over his heart.

His hand cups my cheek. I grab it and kiss his palm, gently stroking his wrist where the tattoo of a red number one he got a week ago is now healing. Rami thought Michael was crazy for doing it, but my boyfriend replied that, since he still can't remember almost anything from those years, he wanted to at least share this with his family. And whatever Michael wants, he gets. I make sure of it.

Like right now, as he's begging me to fill him with his writhing body and heavy breaths. I know how to read him easily.

My tongue leaves a wet path as I move down the bed. When I reach his cock, I skip over it, smirking devilishly at his whine. I spread his legs wide, pushing his feet flat on the sheets and parting his asscheeks. Then, I go to work.

My tongue and lips lap and suck the puckered hole over and over, and the cries leaving his mouth only encourage me to double my efforts. After a minute, my balls are throbbing. My hips keep rolling against the mattress and my tongue is aching to go deeper. He contracts around the tip of my tongue, and I push it further inside, licking another circle around his rim and up to his taint before going back down and pressing into his hole again. I keep going until he's sobbing my name and can't do anything but take it. "Your hole is begging to be fucked raw," I breathe on his gaping entrance. His 'yes' sounds like music to my ears.

MICHAEL

Not giving me a moment to prepare, the caveman wrenches my buttcheeks apart and punches his way into me with a forceful jab of his tongue. I cry and wiggle as he devours me. Can't stop from fucking myself on his tongue like the needy slut he knows I am around him. Holding my ass open with a bruising grip, he ghosts his thumb along the seam of my balls—the combination of pain and comfort is the torture I've realized I crave.

I still love the sight and taste of blood—his blood—but the pleasure-pain, the edging is a new kink we both enjoy deeply. Two of his fingers suddenly spear my mouth and I hollow my cheeks, sucking hard on them, twirling my tongue, making them extra wet.

He pulls his slick fingers out of my mouth just to slam them roughly all the way inside my ass. The burn is so good. It doesn't hurt when he starts fucking me with them, but he adds more spit to smooth his thrusts. When he suddenly sucks on my balls, a spurt of precum pools on my belly. And when he bites hard on my inner thigh, I see fucking stars under my eyelids.

He pushes another finger in and starts scissoring them inside my well-used hole.

“Ready to be fucked in the ass, babe?”

I love how filthy he is. Even more to be pinned down on the bed and used for his pleasure. But today, I want to ride him.

He quickly turns on his back and drags me on top of him. Raph is a controlling fucker, but always gives me what I need. I push and sit on his lap. Lifting my ass higher, I slick his beautifully hard cock with saliva and position it at my back entrance. Slowly, my hips push down, and a long moan escapes me. The sheer relief to be filled again makes my knees weak. It's like my insides are now shaped like his dick at how easily it fits. When he finally bottoms out, we let out a collective sigh. A very short one.

Because I can't stay still a second longer. I start sliding down his cock like a fireman's pole. Raph's hands are clutching my hips, his eyes wild as I sink down. I love that I can throw my very controlled man over the edge; that I can drive him fucking animalistic in a very short time.

"Love your dick," I pant. One hand is planted on Raph's chest, the other holding his right thigh. "Love riding you like this. Taking you so deep inside." I can be dirty too when I want.

"Say it," Raph grits out in a commanding tone.

"I love you," I cry out, without stopping the frantic tempo of my hips. So good. So, so good.

"Mine!" Raph growls, his bruising fingers sinking into my waist.

I suddenly stop my ruthless bouncing and go for a slow grind.

"Fuck," Raph grunts. "Fucking...ah!" I like to reciprocate the teasing at times.

Because I love the power I have over him. It's addictive. Love how much I can make him feel. I try to smirk, and to keep my thrusts slow. But the sight of him under me covered in sweat, messy hair, red lips, and crazy eyes? It's almost too much.

"You're so sexy." My voice is surprisingly steady considering how close to the edge I feel.

"And you are perfect," he replies with his crooked smile.

I smile back, my heart nearly exploding inside my chest, and roll my hips, careful and controlled.

"My perfect piglet." I gasp at that nickname. But he abruptly sits up and grabs two handfuls of my ass. Biting on his lower lip, he starts fucking me from below.

“Yes.” Pure bliss shoots straight into my veins while he rips me open. “I belong to you,” I cry out, knowing his caveman side loves to hear that.

He twists his hips in reward for that statement, making me moan.

“Goddamn right, you belong to me. And I will kill anyone who tries to take you away from me... again.”

Apparently possessive psychopath is a real aphrodisiac for me. I can barely breathe right now. He simply growls and rolls us over. His cock slips out of me, and I whine in disapproval and desperation.

“Raph, fuck me. Please.” I don't need to see his face to know he's smirking as he lines his cock up at my swollen entrance again, pushing between my cheeks.

“Good boy,” he purrs, and I shiver in delight.

One hard thrust and I'm full again. I rock my hips back to meet his, urging him deeper, harder, faster. Raph groans against my neck, snapping his hips forward in a punishing rhythm. I shift my legs higher and settle them around Raph's back to hurry him up. Then I rock back against him, and we both groan.

I lose myself in Raph. He consumes me, body and soul. He has the power to multiply every feeling I have by a thousand with a simple touch, a mere glance, a crooked smile. He sees me in my entirety, overwhelms me on all fronts, and I love the intensity of it.

Our lips press together, tongues fighting back and forth as heat climbs up my spine. He turns his mouth toward my shoulder and bites me hard.

As I come, the convulsions racking my body are so violent, I think I might black out.

His cock twitches as I feel his cum flooding me. “Fuck, yes, I'm marking your insides,” he groans.

There's something about the sensation of being filled with his cum that pushes me over the edge again, and more cum shoots out of my aching dick. It feels so impossibly good I can hardly stand it. I tremble with satisfaction, enjoying the little aftershocks as Raph drops against me, his arms over our heads and his strong, muscular chest pressed to mine. He buries his face in my neck and licks the sting on my shoulder. I turn my face and breathe in his scent of sweat, sex, and Raph.

"I am so glad I met you," I say quietly. My heart clenches. It's such a simple statement, but it leaves me open and vulnerable. And it also makes me think about... What if we never met?

He lifts his head. His bright jade eyes study me intently. "I'd do it all over again to get to you."

I know he means it. He'd go through all that atrocious pain and lonely years again just to be with me. Instead of crying this time, I decide to engage all those emotions dancing inside me in a more productive way and kiss the hell out of the man I happen to be head over heels in love with.

Raph's phone puts an end to the sweet moment. Our big family and busy work schedules are always intruding into our bubble. But I still enjoy the sight of his bare ass while he bends to retrieve his cell from his pants on the floor.

"What?" he answers, sitting on the bed with his back to me. I quickly push up and wrap my arms around his shoulders, plastering my chest to his side.

"We are downstairs. Let us come up!" I hear Rami yelling from the phone.

"Fuck off," is Raph's reply. He laces his fingers with mine and places them on his heart.

"Get your cock out of Michael, and..."

"How do you know it's not my cock inside him?" I ask.

After a few seconds of silence, Uri replies, “Nice try, Mike. Tell the psycho to let us up.” He snorts.

“Shut up, you sociopathic idiot,” Raph deadpans.

“You know I can easily find the elevator code to your apartment. I’m being polite here,” Rami reminds him.

Raph stands up and starts putting his clothes on while holding the phone between his shoulder and ear. I go to the bathroom to wash myself. It’s true Raph likes to be in control in and out the bedroom. But in reality, most of the time, I have the power. I choose what I want, and Raph gives it to me, I don’t even have to ask anymore. We are so attuned, he knows already.

When I walk back into the room, Raph is gone. I open the first drawer of the dresser to put a pair of sweaters and a t-shirt on—no more covering my arms. Fuck that.

The clothes are all new. Raph really burned all my old ones with Rague’s help, and I shaved the hair on my pecs in retaliation. I have to admit that the angry sex that night was off-the-charts hot.

I hear voices from the living room. My eyes fall on the desk near the window. The file on Subject One is laying on the gleaming surface. It’s thick, and even though I’ve only read the first few pages, horrifying. I asked Meg to give it to me, because I need to know what happened. The memories keep coming at times, but I can’t put them together. It’s frustrating and scary.

I hear a pained cry coming from the next room, so I let go of my dark thoughts and head to the kitchen.

Rami has Uri in a headlock, his dreads falling like waterfall on his annoyed face. “Stop calling me that!” he threatens his much bigger brother.

“But you do look like a beautiful mermaid, *Ariel*,” Rami sneers.

“Triton. Male mermaids are called tritons,” Rague states. “But Uriel-Ariel, that's a good one.”

“I’m not a fucking fish!” Uri barks, his face turning red. “And fuck you, Raguel-Rachel!”

“A triton is technically not a fish,” Rague corrects him.

God, Meg is right. They are overgrown children.

“Knock it off or I’ll go grab my knife and do some damage before kicking you out of my apartment,” I say, earning a kiss to the temple and a squeeze on my ass from Raph. Thinking of his penthouse as mine has taken a bit of adjustment. The whole luxurious life, actually. But I have to admit, it’s not bad. What am I saying? It’s fucking amazing.

“Lower your trotter, piglet,” Rami jokes, making me want to really use my knife. Raph has been teaching me some self-defense moves and I discovered I’m quite good with blades. Guns on the other hand...

Uri shoves Rami away and goes to the fridge to grab a beer.

“I brought your favorite.” Rami hands me an extra-large bag of sour cream and onion chips.

“For me?” I ask incredulously. It’s disturbingly sweet. Disturbingly, because Rami doesn’t miss an opportunity to tease me.

“And this.” He places a bottle of Tums on the counter. “For your reflux.” And there it is.

“You’re an ass,” I accuse him. Without a hint of venom, though. Because I unfortunately do love him. I love all of them.

Raph narrows his eyes at Rami. “You brought my boyfriend his favorite chips?” he asks in a dry tone.

“Are you seriously implying that I’d try to steal Mike away with a bag of chips?” Rami raises his brow. “Are you that easy?” He then turns to me.

“You’re both morons,” I retort, waving at Rague on my way to the couch.

Uri drops next to me. “Lunch tomorrow?” He comes to the hospital from time to time to talk about our favorite crime series. Uri also enjoys hearing about weird things I encounter during my job, and I love the food he brings from one of his restaurants.

It’s incredible how things have changed in only a month. After what Rami calls my ‘*initiation night*,’ the whole family started treating me as one of their own.

I don’t have an *active* part in the family side business. I help Sari with the samples at times—working with him is a damn dream come true. And I like to research new methods or weapons Raph and the others can use. I also give them advice on how to make the donors suffer and bleed more. It’s weird how after only a few weeks I got used to it. Maybe it’s because Rami keeps showing me what the shitheads did to deserve their fate. And many times, I’m so disgusted, I wish I could end their life myself.

“Looking forward to it.” I smile at Uri.

He blinds me with his super model smile and steals the chips from my lap. I flick his forehead in retaliation and take the bag back.

“Hey!” he complains.

“Learn to ask,” I bark at him.

Raph comes and sits next to me and promptly pulls me on his lap. Every time his brothers are around, he gets overly possessive. What am I saying? He’s always overly possessive.

“Where’s Sari?” I start eating the chips, but I can’t resist Uri’s puppy eyes, so I tilt the bag his way.

“Working,” Rague replies, sitting on the red armchair I found at a used market a couple of weeks ago. The family keeps coming to our place

uninvited; we needed more seats.

“Why are you here, then?” Raph asks Uri.

“Sari kicked him out of the lab,” Rami snickers. Wow, I can’t imagine Sari doing that. He’s too sweet.

“Fuck off!” Uri kicks Rami in the shin.

“Clingy fucker,” he mutters back, going over to the beeping intercom at the door. “Pizza is coming.” Rami stands near the elevator to grab the food and wink at the pizza guy before he leaves. He’s such a flirt.

“You look like a porn star when you wink like that.” Rague shakes his head at Rami’s idiocy.

“And you’d know that well, right bro?” he quips back.

“Why are you in my apartment again? Seeing you all every Sunday at Meg and Linda’s isn’t enough?”

“It’s called nothing to do, foster brother,” Rami retorts, placing the three pizza boxes on the coffee table. I know he’s lying. They’re here because they want to spend time with me and get to know me better. “Plus, after next week, Hulky and I will be kind of busy with a donor research.”

“The clandestine fights?” I ask.

“Yep,” Rami replies, popping the p. Rague seems lost in thought for a second.

“Be careful,” I tell him, and he just nods in reply. He’s a damn giant; I’m not afraid he’ll get hurt. But under all those tons of muscles, Rague has a big heart I’m just starting to get to know.

Raph sighs under me.

“You need to learn to share, Mr. Hottie,” I tell him, giving him a small peck on his nose.

“You? Never.” He wraps both arms around me tightly.

“Sharing means caring.” Rami draws a heart with his fingers.

“Where the fuck did you put the globe?” Uri suddenly asks Raph.

“Globe?” Raph tilts his head to the side while giving his brother an empty look.

“The crystal globe that was on Sari’s desk in the lab. The one I gave him as a birthday present.” Uri narrows his eyes.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Raph told me all about their Pink Panther game. I just hope Uri isn’t going to take anything of mine next.

“Do you know?” Uri narrows his eyes at me.

I throw him a challenging look. “Don’t want to know. Keep me out of it.”

Rami hands me a soda. “Good choice,” he whispers. He sits down on the rug and grabs the remote to turn on the TV.

The fight over what to watch starts then, and instead of rolling my eyes at them, I smile. Because I feel happy. I have a less than perfect family I fit right in with. And a boyfriend who, in his own way, loves me and makes me feel wanted. He fixed all the cracks and filled all the missing pieces inside me.

And as I watch our family noisily bantering back and forth, I snuggle closer to Raph and sigh contently at the feel of his arms around me, his nose nuzzling my hair. I savor his warm breaths, and the rise and fall of his chest against my back. The simple thought that I might have this for the rest of my life makes my throat ache.

I finally belong. I’m Michael, one of the angels of wrath.

THE END

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Afterword

I hope you enjoyed this story.

It took me more than usual to write it. The research on psychopaths took me down a dark tunnel...which I kind of enjoyed ;)

Dark, tormented MCs are my favorite with a touch of bossiness and a big load of possessiveness. The dirtier the better. Yummy! More delicious ones are coming your way. I love the bloody, angelic family.

Subject Six will be next.

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